

APPLICATION

Experiences of Strategy in Action

ABSTRACT: The population of Afghanistan was inevitably the recipient of poorly or properly executed strategy. The previous two chapters examined the accuracy of understanding and barriers to strategy development. This chapter examines the application of understanding and strategy. More specifically, it examines how the absence or presence of different forms of understanding in Afghanistan enabled or hindered the development of effective strategy through three case-examples centered around ‘human focused’, roles of the US Army Special Operations Forces: Civil-Affairs (CA); Foreign Internal Defense’ (FID); and, Psychological Operations (PSYOP).

7.1 COUNTER-NARCOTICS

7.2 VILLAGE STABILITY OPERATIONS & AFGHAN LOCAL POLICE

7.3 COUNTER-PROPAGANDA

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(MIS)UNDERSTANDING AFGHANISTAN

An Ethnographic Examination of 'Human Elements'
Affecting the Nexus Between Understanding & Strategy in
Population-Centric Conflict

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The following excerpt is a pre-publication reviewer copy of *(Mis)Understanding Afghanistan: An Ethnographic Examination of 'Human Elements' Affecting the Nexus Between Understanding & Strategy in Population-Centric Conflict*. Comments on the manuscript can be forwarded to AGavriel01@qub.ac.uk.



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7. APPLICATION

EXPERIENCES OF STRATEGY IN ACTION

“In Afghanistan, things are rarely as they seem, and the outcomes of actions we take, however well-intended, are often different from what we expect... For example, digging a well sounds quite simple. How could you do anything wrong by digging a well to give people clean water? Where you build that well, who controls that water, and what water it taps into all have tremendous implications and create great passion. If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village. If you tap into underground water, you give power to the owner of that well that they did not have before, because the traditional irrigation system was community-owned. If you dig a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village.” — General Stanley McChrystal, Commander of ISAF in Afghanistan, 2010.¹

The population of Afghanistan was inevitably the recipient of poorly or properly executed strategy. The previous two chapters examined the accuracy of understanding and barriers to strategy development. This chapter examines the application of understanding and strategy. More specifically, it examines how the absence or presence of different forms of understanding in Afghanistan enabled or hindered the development of effective strategy through three case-examples: (7.1) ‘Countering-Narcotics’ (7.2) ‘Village Stability and Afghan Local Police’; and, (7.3) ‘Countering-Propaganda’.

Each selected case-example aligns with (arguably) under-utilised, more ‘human focused’, roles of the US Army Special Operations Forces: (1) ‘**Civil-Affairs**’ (CA), operations focused on aspects of engaging civil-society spanning from ‘rule-of-law’, ‘economic stability’, ‘governance’, ‘aid’, and ‘development’; (2) ‘**Foreign Internal Defense**’ (FID), operations focused on the development of local security and defence forces; and, ‘**Psychological Operations**’ (PSYOP), influence and communication

¹ Quoted in: Callahan 2015: 117.

campaigns focused on persuading local support and participation — specialised roles considered falling within the ‘human domain’ of military / counterinsurgent operations, as introduced and defined by US Army Special Forces ‘Green Beret’ Lieutenant-Colonel (LTC) Scott Mann: *“US Special Operations Command defines the ‘human domain’ as the totality of the physical, cultural and social environments that influence human behavior in population-centric conflict. This is a fancy way of saying the broad spectrum of humanity. After all,... stabilizing at-risk areas are inherently human endeavors.”*²

The chapter utilises the same ‘zoom-in/zoom-out’ approach persistent throughout the dissertation to contrast the perspectives of variant actor-groups: each case-example ‘zooms-out’ to overview the background, purpose, and intent of respective counterinsurgent strategies; ‘zooms-in’ to interviews with local-actor participants who experienced the strategy in its application; and, then ‘zooms-back-out’ to a discussion with a panel of ‘knowledge-producers’ on which sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ better unravelled complexity in a manner that aligned with the insights provided by the local-actor participants and defined strategy options for decision-makers.

In closing, each case-example concludes not with specific ‘policy-prescription’ on which strategies may or may not have been more effective; but, rather, a reflection upon an associated ‘lesson learned’ — or, perhaps more accurately, ‘lesson encountered’ where the experience may not have been ‘learned’ by the institution for integration into future practise — on how adequate forms of ‘population-centric understanding’ either did, or could have, enabled effective strategy development.³

² Mann 2017: 147. For doctrinal ‘Human Domain’ definition see: USSOCOM 2013.

³ The distinction between ‘lessons learned’ and ‘lessons encountered’ is examined in: Hooker and Collins 2015.

7.1

CASE EXAMPLE: COUNTERING-NARCOTICS

Afghanistan's 'opium-problem': "Reducing opium production is one of the greatest challenges facing Afghanistan. Opium is central to the macroeconomy, contributing one-third of the GDP and significant support for aggregate demand and the balance of payments. In the rural economy, opium is a key livelihoods coping strategy for as many as 350,000 farm families, most of them poor. In the area of security, opium is fuelling warlordism and terrorism and in governance the illegal economy is capturing or undermining state building efforts at all levels." — David Mansfield, Afghanistan Counter Narcotics Expert.⁴

'Countering-Narcotics' refers to operations and strategies set to address Afghanistan's 'opium-problem' — a complex set of issues that drive instability from the local to national level whether through providing financial support to criminal and insurgent groups, destroying the lives of young addicted Afghans seeking heroin as an escape from the country's volatility, or displacing opportunities for sustainable licit agricultural industries as Afghanistan risks becoming a narco-economy. As a complex problem with multi-faceted underlying issues ranging from insecurity to localised socio-economic conditions, 'countering-narcotics' falls within the domain of Civil Affairs (CA) involving a vast array of 'rule-of-law', 'economic stability', 'governance', 'aid', and 'development' operations that further challenges the institution in coordinating equally multi-faceted strategies across this disparate array of specialised activities.⁵

⁴ Mansfield 2019: 75.

⁵ For additional studies on Counter Narcotics efforts and opium cultivation in Afghanistan, see: DuPee 2010; Mansfield 2002; Mansfield 2016; Ledwidge 2013; Peters 2009; Peters 2010..

As a complex effort coordinated across justice, security, governance, and development components of the ‘counterinsurgency apparatus’, US/NATO Counter-Narcotics operations were divided into four strands: (1) ‘Interdiction and Counterdrug Law Enforcement’ — *“Programs to investigate, arrest, prosecute, and imprison drug traffickers, as well as seize illegal narcotics and destroy drug-production facilities”*; (2) ‘Eradication’ — *“The physical destruction of a standing crop”*; (3) ‘Mobilisation of Afghan Political Support and Institution Building’ — *“Assistance to build Afghan political support for counternarcotics initiatives and to strengthen Afghan institutional capacity to carry out those initiatives”*; and, most relevant to this case-example, (4) ‘Alternative Livelihoods’ — *“Aid projects designed to reduce poppy cultivation by increasing licit economic alternatives”*.⁶

As the largest ‘Alternative Livelihoods’ initiative, the ‘Helmand Food Zone’ (HFZ) project focused on Afghanistan’s most agriculturally productive region, the fertile plains of the Helmand River Valley, as a multi-million dollar inter-governmental effort aimed at replacing opium cultivation with a viable licit alternative.⁷

Described by Afghanistan Counter-Narcotics subject matter expert David Mansfield, *“the premise on which the HFZ was built was simple: with sufficient coercion, farmers would abandon opium poppy in favour of another less lucrative crop, wheat.”*⁸ Through this project, *“[w]heat seed and fertiliser would... be given to farmers to provide them with an alternative to opium poppy and a source of food in the absence of*

⁶ SIGAR 2018: 59.

⁷ For additional studies on Alternative Livelihood programmes in Afghanistan, see: Blanchard 2009; Mansfield 2017; Rosen and Katzman 2014; UNODC 2019.

⁸ Mansfield 2019: 14.

the income that they would have earned from the opium harvest.”⁹ However, opium and wheat “had wildly different input requirements, particularly much lower labour intensity” which would “prove especially important with regard to the longer-term effects of the HFZ and its impact on patterns of poppy cultivation.”¹⁰

Despite these efforts and the diversified ‘four-strand’ overall Counter-Narcotics strategy, a consolidated review performed by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) found that none of these initiatives proved to be successful in the long-term.

Two months before the official close of the US/NATO ISAF mission at the end of 2014, SIGAR released a report summarising the status of *“Poppy Cultivation in Afghanistan”* with the blunt subtitle: *“After a decade of reconstruction and over \$7 billion in counternarcotics efforts, poppy cultivation levels are at an all-time high”*.¹¹ Continued by SIGAR Inspector General, John F. Sopko: *“Despite this investment, Afghanistan remains the world’s largest opium producer, and opium poppy is the country’s largest cash crop.”*¹² Furthermore, *“[t]he Afghan drug trade has undermined reconstruction and security, including by financing insurgent groups and fuelling government corruption.”*¹³ Overall, SIGAR asserted that *“no counternarcotics program led to lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production. Eradication efforts had no lasting impact, and eradication was not consistently conducted in the same geographic locations as development assistance.*

⁹ Mansfield 2019: 14.

¹⁰ Mansfield 2019: 14-15.

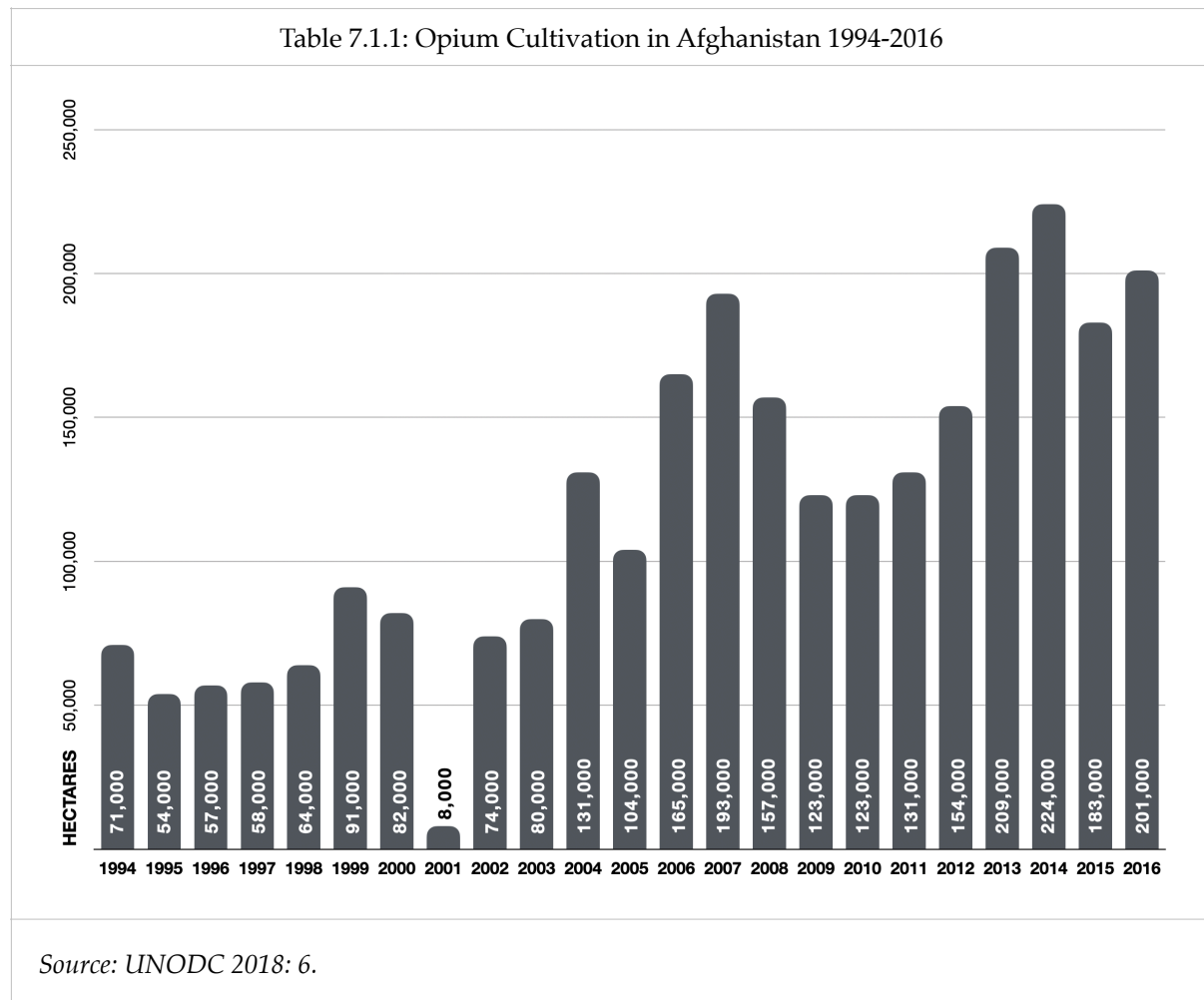
¹¹ SIGAR 2014: 1.

¹² SIGAR 2018: vii.

¹³ SIGAR 2018: 1.

Alternative development programs were often too short-term, failed to provide sustainable alternatives to poppy, and sometimes even contributed to poppy production.”¹⁴

SIGARs findings are substantiated by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) twenty-year overview of opium cultivation levels in Afghanistan — measured by hectares of land dedicated to poppy farming (See: Table 7.1.1).¹⁵ As depicted, opium cultivation levels were highest during periods of greatest insecurity (2006-2008), lowest during the surge (2009-2011), and rose steadily as US/NATO forces retrograded and withdrew (2013-2014).



¹⁴ SIGAR 2018: 1. The SIGAR (2018: 163) report furthered that: “Over the course of the reconstruction effort to date [2002-2017], poppy cultivation rose more than 340 percent, from roughly 74,000 hectares in 2002 to an estimated 328,000 hectares in 2017. Potential opium production increased by approximately 164 percent, from 3,400 metric tons to 9,000 metric tons over the same period.”

¹⁵ UNODC 2018: 6.

Reflected upon by SIGAR, the *“overall growth of poppy cultivation and opium production was, in part, due to failures in the strategy, design, and implementation of counternarcotics efforts.”*¹⁶ Specifically, in relation to ‘Alternative Livelihood’ projects such as the HFZ initiative: *“[t]he bulk of USAID’s alternative development programming focused on large-scale, short-term interventions designed to replace poppy with another crop. Yet most of these projects failed to provide a clear assessment of how program activities contributed to reductions in opium production, or mitigated against the risk of encouraging poppy cultivation. Some projects, for example improvements to irrigation systems, even contributed to increased poppy cultivation.”*¹⁷

In failing to address complexity, *“alternative development programs were too short-term and often relied on the simple substitution of other crops for poppy. These programs did not bring about lasting reductions in opium poppy cultivation and sometimes even contributed to increased poppy production.”*¹⁸ As a result: *“US agencies and implementing partners often failed to consider and mitigate the risk that alternative development programs could contribute to increased poppy cultivation and drug production. In some areas, alternative development programs inadvertently enabled more poppy production.”*¹⁹

¹⁶ SIGAR 2018: 163-164.

¹⁷ SIGAR 2018: 106.

¹⁸ SIGAR 2018: 168. According to Mansfield (2017: 15) with regards to the HFZ: *“This was classic ‘crop substitution’ – a model of drug control that had largely been abandoned by organisations like UNODC in the 1980s. Seen to focus unduly on simply replacing one crop with another, and not on the physical infrastructure, market support and social change required to help farmers transition from drug crop cultivation, crop substitution was replaced by a more comprehensive rural development known as Alternative Development in the 1990s.”*

¹⁹ SIGAR 2018: 168.

In a condemning final assessment, SIGAR Inspector General John F. Sopko concluded that, after nearly two-decades: *“No counterdrug program undertaken by the United States, its coalition partners, or the Afghan government resulted in lasting reductions in poppy cultivation or opium production.”*²⁰

Zeroing-in on the underlying issues affecting strategy, an interviewed Counter Narcotics practitioner described: *“There was always a disparity between what Afghans needed and what the development community thought they needed... Farmers in Helmand persistently expressed there was no market for any crop other than opium, but [US/NATO] counter-narcotics programmes continued to help farmers grow crops they couldn’t sell... It fell on deaf ears.”*²¹ Much of this disparity was related to endemic institutional issues, as continued: *“These development programmes are a bit of a racquet — ‘This worked in Africa so it’ll probably work here’ —[and] theres even a fair amount of arrogance tied to it. But it’s the ignorance tied to it that’s more dangerous: if the conditions aren’t the same in Afghanistan as they were in Africa, how in the hell does it stand a chance of working? The bottom-line is no one was listening; [and] no one was really bothered to be asking either.”*²² Furthermore, a viable alternative to opium cultivation would have many natural advantages to contend with (as outlined by David Mansfield in Table 7.1.1).²³

²⁰ SIGAR 2018: 1. Furthered by SIGAR (2018: 169): *“Where improvements in security were combined with the development of legal livelihood options, localized poppy crop reductions were possible. Those reductions, however, were either temporary or offset by increases in other areas. It was not possible to sustain these reductions in light of growing opposition to the government of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of U.S. forces after 2014.”* As an additional complication: *“In limited areas with improved security and greater economic opportunities, some Afghans were able to diversify their livelihoods away from opium poppy. However, local reductions in poppy cultivation were almost always short-lived or offset by increases elsewhere.”* (SIGAR 2018: 169)

²¹ Interview, DS, International Narcotics League Civilian Contractor, 2018.

²² Interview, DS, International Narcotics League Civilian Contractor, 2018.

²³ Mansfield 2019: 76.

Table 7.1.1: Counter-Narcotics Expert David Mansfield on Benefits of Growing Poppy

In Afghanistan's current economic and political climate there are many advantages to cultivating opium poppy. It is a high-value, low-weight, durable commodity, for which there is strong demand. There are sufficient returns at each stage of the value chain and well-developed market linkages in terms of credit, purchase, transport and processing, all of which function well and flexibly despite Afghanistan's fractured infrastructure...

Opium poppy can be cultivated almost anywhere in the country, although it grows best in free draining sandy loam soils. It is so well-suited to Afghanistan's agro-climatic conditions that it produces higher than the global average yields of raw opium and morphine and maximises returns to scarce irrigation water. This latter attribute and its marketability have proven crucial to farmers with small landholdings and large families, particularly in remote areas where opium poppy cultivation is becoming increasingly concentrated.

Zooming-in to local actor perspectives, a panel interview was convened of farmers and other residents of Helmand Province involved in agricultural production to discuss decision processes driving opium cultivation and the perceived effectiveness of externally implemented counter-narcotics efforts.

Introduced by a land-owning farmer in Helmand, the panel-member overviewed the various 'alternative livelihood' programmes implemented in his area throughout the course of the US/NATO mission: *"I can say very simple for the [strategy] in my Helmand Province, over the many years. Each season they are saying different options for us. They are saying not to grow poppy and they burn the field — then, we are having no money from our labour and we need this money to survive for winter. They are saying 'grow cotton' and we are growing; but, nobody buys this from us. They are saying 'grow wheat', and are giving us the wheat seed; but, they are giving this seed to*

*everyone, everyone is growing this wheat, and now this crop is worthless (referring to flooding the market). They are saying 'grow food' and, yes, we are growing and feeding ourselves; but, look at Afghanistan — we have no roads! It is rotten before we can sell this; we can feed ourselves but have no money in winter. They are saying 'grow saffron' [because] it makes lots of money — [but] in Iran, they are making the price of saffron lower and we can't sell at this low price (referring to the government subsidies given to saffron crops). Always again we must be growing poppy [because] no one is buying [anything else] from us and we are needing this money for our families. Always they are having some great ideas (the 'alternative livelihoods' programmes) but they are not thinking how these ideas end for us."*²⁴

Primary advantages of opium cultivation cited by panel-members included that poppy was well suited to the climate — *"it is growing very naturally here, always it is surviving well, even it is hard to kill"* — and produced high yields off of even small or marginal land holdings that provided cash to purchase other goods.²⁵ Described by a panel-member: *"Even [if] I have five fields, I am making two for poppy. If my [other] crops are failing, I will have money from the poppy to survive. If my [other] crops are not failing, I have money to start for my next season"*, referring to the start-up inputs required at the beginning of each planting season.²⁶

²⁴ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

²⁵ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

²⁶ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

Other, less known, advantages included the allocation of community-sourced resources for agricultural production that favoured poppy-planters due to the crop's high-rate of return — in particular, local allocations of financial loans for labour, fertiliser, or redirection of irrigation resources (controlled by a village 'mirab'). As explained: *"Any crop we are growing, the community decides 'how will you pay back to us' the things we are needing for planting and harvesting. If you are planting poppy, they know you can pay so they will give you these things. If you are not planting this poppy, even workers will not help your harvest [incase] you can not pay them after."*²⁷

This latter aspect, 'wage labour', was cited as another advantage of opium production that employed many members of the community as opposed to other crops that were less labour intensive: *"Its taking many people to harvest and gives lots of money to pay these people to come and make the harvest for us. If these people are not having these jobs, or are receiving this money, they will have to do many bad things. Even they are joining Taliban for some activities (attacks, operations); they rely on this money and harvest is their main living"*, describing how the harvest season is often where these labourers acquire their annual income.²⁸

Cited as the most alluring advantage to opium cultivation was the assurance that there would be a market for their crop at the end of the harvest: *"Always it is guaranteed that they (drug traffickers) will buy it. They purchase even before the harvest is finished. Their gunman protect your field until the harvest is finished and you have your money guaranteed. Every farmer is needing this guarantee for every crop."*²⁹

²⁷ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

²⁸ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

²⁹ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

Moving on to ‘disadvantages’, panel-members acknowledged that there exist many drawbacks associated with involvement in opium cultivation. On the backside of the appeal of opium cultivation, primarily the up-front provisions of loans, credits, and start-up inputs at the beginning of the season, panel-members raised the dangers of being indebted to insurgents and criminal drug traffickers: *“If Taliban give us [loans] to start growing season and then comes the government [to] burn my field, I am owing them money. How should I pay for this? If I have nothing? Some people come to major problem in this case. Maybe they are kidnapping you for ransom. Maybe your family members, they will do this [to]. I know one man, he had nothing to give to them, so they said ‘you must marry your daughter to Mujahid (Taliban)... This is the cost of your debt!’ Government, they are burning; and you, you are paying with your family, their life!”*³⁰

Continued by another panel-member: *“These debts are [a] problem for us. They (Taliban) give us monies for paying workers... [But after] eradication, if we can not pay, they are asking how we are giving them this debt. They will take anything! Our blood! Our life! Our family! I also know this man, he had to give his daughter for marriage to them, [because] he couldn’t pay! And where are these government forces? They are burning fields! And, let me tell you, they are not burning all fields — only if you can’t pay!”*³¹

Attracting the unwanted attention from both government and insurgent/criminal groups was viewed as a community-wide draw-back: *“It brings much bad to our area: Fighting! Corruption! This is no life! No one will be choosing this life for themselves, for their families, [but] this life is only option for survival!”* Continued by another panel-

³⁰ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³¹ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

member: *"If Taliban are coming, so are coming American airplanes and bombs to destroy them. [And] this fighting is also destroying our homes and our fields. We are not needing this devil opium in our Helmand Province. Only we are needing to survive, feeding our families, [and] having security for the next year that we can pay to begin farming again."*³²

Although a viable alternative was not perceived, panel-members recognised how the short-term gains had long-term social and security consequences for their communities as a whole: *"People growing are becoming drug addicted. They become worse with no money. Only bad groups are profiting — making our security worse — from these drug smugglers and gunman. Security is worse so no one can stop the bad groups from threatening us."*³³

Shifting discussion to the failures of 'alternative livelihood' programmes, panel-members were quick to point out the failings of perceived 'moral arguments' they regarded as insulting and proof that strategy-makers were unfamiliar with local realities: *"They say [to] us, 'if you're growing poppy, you are supporting Taliban'. I am not political person, I am supporting no one, just I am supporting my family."*³⁴ Furthered by another panel-member: *"They are thinking we are greedy and this is why we are growing [poppy]. Let me tell you, these are not the riches to bring you a good life! You must build a life growing good things, things that are halal (moral), and don't bring negative attention from either foreigner or Taliban."*³⁵

³² Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³³ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³⁴ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³⁵ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

Panel-members further distinguished development initiatives that insulted farmers by failing to understand the complexities of their situation: *“I am a farmer! I can grow anything! I can grow my own food to eat it! I can’t buy things from market. I can’t grow money! Even if I am growing food, I am keeping some of my land for poppy to buy food in winter. What should I eat in winter when this food crop is eaten or rotten? Do they think about this?”*³⁶

Failing to address this oversight, panel-members noted that farmers who received government assistance for alternative crops were still tempted to plant poppy to generate cash: *“These crops can spoil. Food crops spoil very fast. It’s important to grow some opium, save it for after the big season when the prices are higher. This is security for us... maybe there is some problem with our [alternative] crop and we will need this money for planting [alternative] crop in the next season”*.³⁷

Such issues were exacerbated by corruption which further alienated residents from the government, especially where the law was applied unequally: *“Farmers who break the law, who pay bribes, they are not punished. It is tempting for every farmer who sees this to plant next season.”*³⁸ Continued by another panel-member: *“What faith can people have in this government if they can’t fix our simple problems. They promise they can give us even just seed or fertiliser; but, they are corrupt — and they say ‘you must pay’! We can’t pay so we take seeds and loans from Taliban; then government are coming to burning our fields! Now [we have] no seeds, no poppy, just burnt [fields] and debt — [so] we have to grow more poppy next year or Taliban will kill us! This is the government’s fault! Not our*

³⁶ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³⁷ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

³⁸ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

*fault!"*³⁹ Another panel-member highlighted how this further undermined Afghan government credibility and distanced them from the people: *"They can burn fields. But they can't build the clinic, school, mosque, or pave roads! We grow opium to build these things. If they build them, maybe we don't need to do this."*⁴⁰

In discussion of what programmes worked, panel-members pointed to the allure and strengths of the system used by criminal and insurgent groups that suited local socio-economic conditions and asked why counterinsurgents could not replicate this system.

Pointing to its strengths, panel-members explained: *"In the Taliban programme, they are giving us poppy seed at start of the season, they are providing the loans to pay labourers and for water and fertiliser, they come and buy it from us at the end of the harvest — this is the most important! It doesn't matter how much we are being paid for poppy; it is their guarantee that if we grow, it will be purchased from us."*⁴¹

Another farmer commented how the high farm-gate price for opium was not its greatest incentive, as commonly believed: *"We are not receiving very much from poppy for its value. The drug people (traffickers) are making this money (profit). Probably, we are not receiving much more money than from other crops. What is the big difference is [that] the money is paid end of harvest with this guarantee! They are guarantee to purchase (at the end of the season). [And] they are providing for us the monies we need to start the plantings (at the beginning of the season)."*⁴²

³⁹ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

⁴⁰ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

⁴¹ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

⁴² Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

In conclusion, panel-members expressed they were aware of the dangers and downfalls of opium cultivation, but maintained they have few other viable options: *“We know opium is very bad for us and for Afghanistan. Drugs destroy our young people... We are not having this choice. If we are having help — proper help from foreigners — we will not grow it next year or year after. [But] without help, we grow it to survive.”*⁴³

Reflecting back on strategy, Counter-Narcotics subject matter expert David Mansfield described how the HFZ initiative failed to achieve long-term results: *“replacing opium poppy with wheat or other staples is typically a household’s short-term response to coercion, and that farmers will soon thereafter resume opium production.”*⁴⁴ Furthermore, the underlying principle of *“Grow wheat, feed your family”*, supported by an information campaign, *“was a simple message that sought to support the replacement of poppy by wheat. But for many farmers, particularly the land-poor, this message created confusion, if not mistrust. Were this group to grow only wheat, they would not have sufficient output to meet their family food requirements — their family would go hungry. Farmers cultivated poppy precisely because when grown, opium could be sold for cash. This cash would purchase a greater amount of wheat flour than were the farmer to cultivate wheat on the same unit of land; these farmers recognised that if they grew wheat, they and their families would go hungry.”*⁴⁵

⁴³ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

⁴⁴ Mansfield 2019: 63.

⁴⁵ Mansfield 2019: 18. Mansfield (2019: 18) furthers how these messages were undermined when not backed-up by action: *“The result was the overall message that farmers would receive assistance and experience a heightened risk of crop losses through eradication was not tailored to those who would see these risks and benefits — who were, after all, a minority of the population. Many farmers, particularly during the first two years of the HFZ, saw neither inputs nor eradication undermining the information campaign and the Afghan government and creating the impression that the campaign was background noise, or, as some farmers put it, ‘just farting’.”*

Pointing to failures in strategy, Mansfield continues that: *“The HFZ even sought to replace opium (a cash crop) with wheat (a food crop), something that even crop substitution programmes in other countries with all their flaws had not done for years, knowing full well the errors of doing so.”*⁴⁶ As consequence, *“five years after the formal withdrawal of NATO forces from Helmand and seven years after the end of the HFZ, poppy had returned to the area in abundance. The rapid reduction in cultivation in the HFZ that was seen in 2009, and sustained for some years after, had been replaced by a rebound, not just within the boundaries of the HFZ, but... outside as well.”*⁴⁷

SIGAR also concedes that *“[a]lternative development programming was often based on a poor understanding of why poppy was grown and failed to address the multiple economic roles played by poppy in rural Afghanistan.”*⁴⁸ Due to this lack of complex understanding to inform strategy: *“policymakers sometimes falsely assumed that a counterdrug intervention—whether eradication, rural development, or interdiction—would have the same effect in different locations, regardless of local conditions. The failure to accurately evaluate the rural Afghan economy often led to overly simplistic crop replacement programs that failed to fill the economic gap left by decreased opium production or yield lasting poppy reductions.”*⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Mansfield 2019: 61. Furthermore: *“For small marginal farmers there is no other crop under current conditions that can provide the same returns. When opium declines in those areas, the opportunities for farm income for such households will also decline, driving people off the land.”* (Mansfield 2019: 76)

⁴⁷ Mansfield 2019: 44.

⁴⁸ SIGAR 2018: 168

⁴⁹ SIGAR 2018: 173. The SIGAR (2018: 174) assessment continues that: *“counternarcotics strategies and programs should be based on a robust understanding of how the illicit drug economy functions and how it relates to local socioeconomic and political conditions. Policymakers and planners must consider local context when designing counterdrug programs and evaluating their contribution to the overall reconstruction effect. In Afghanistan, policymakers sometimes assumed that a counterdrug intervention—whether eradication, rural development, or interdiction—would have the same effect in different locations, regardless of local conditions... For example, the destruction of drug crops in a district with few viable alternatives and where insurgent groups hold sway will likely lead to different outcomes than eradication in areas under government control. Similarly, investments in rural development, such as irrigation, might support agricultural diversification in an area where there are opportunities to produce and sell legal crops, while in other areas they may inadvertently support increased opium production. The failure to accurately evaluate the rural Afghan economy often led to overly simplistic crop replacement programs that failed to fill the economic gap left by decreased opium production or yield lasting poppy reductions.”*

In reflection of ‘understanding’, the ‘knowledge-producer’ panel provided discussion on which sources of ‘population-centric’ understanding were more effective at unravelling complexity to inform decision-makers of strategy options in a manner that aligned with the insights provided by the local-actor participants interviewed in this case-example.

To monitor the effect of various strategies to make an impact on opium production, one panel-member explained the importance of quantitative ‘baseline metrics’: *“The UNODC Opium Surveys gave a clear metric on the effectiveness of whether various interdiction efforts were working or not — be they eradication or ‘Alternative Livelihoods’ (referring to development programmes that sought to replace opium production with other crops)... There’s a clear bottom-line here: there’s only so much arable land in Afghanistan; its either being used to grow opium, or its not... [so] there’s few ways to tamper with this metric. What it doesn’t tell you is ‘why’ a certain effort worked or failed... And you [often] can’t determine this until the following year; because, its not so much on if you lowered the production in a given year, it’s if the effort lowered production in the following years — that’s the metric of success: a failed effort might reduce it in the year its implemented; but, it must lower it in the subsequent year to know that the effort worked well enough to displace future production and they didn’t just go back to doing what they did before.”*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Panel Interview, Population-Centric Knowledge Producers, 2018. Panel members also discussed an issue referred to as ‘squeezing the balloon’ where a clamp down in one area may push the problem to another. This was described as the case in the arable and fertile lands in Helmand and the shift of some opium growers to set up in less desirable lands such as in the marginal desert regions. However, the quoted panel-member maintained that this still substantially reduced the overall opium cultivation levels.

Furthering this point, another panel-member commented on the utility of qualitative baseline products such as those produced by ‘Afghan Research-Institutes’ in form of ethnographic ‘area studies’: *“Village assessments, the few that were produced in these areas where opium production was high,... not only mapped-out their traditional subsistence economies... [but also] explained other intricacies: from what farmers usually grew in the area, their interdependence on trade with adjoining areas and other tribes, [and] who was involved in the decision-making process. You wouldn’t think this; but, [this] is a community effort — the shuras (town councils) get together and figure out what’s best for their community, and there’s a lot of players involved! That even extends to corruption: sometimes a district official has ‘his hands in the pocket’ and vested interest to grow opium — it doesn’t matter what ‘farmers’ want; you have to take all this into account.”*⁵¹

Reinforcing the requirement to understand how community decisions are made, another panel-member pointed to the importance of ethnographic studies produced by ‘academic anthropologists’, referring to a paper on ‘informal power-structures’ and ‘customary institutions’ at the village level: *“Before this, we’d have no idea what a ‘mirab’ is (village water controller) or that this even played a part in the process. These things paint a picture for us that there’s a lot more at play than we realise and different parties we need to engage... if we’re going to gain their participation”*.⁵²

⁵¹ Panel Interview, Population-Centric Knowledge Producers, 2018.

⁵² Panel Interview, Population-Centric Knowledge Producers, 2018. The quoted panel-member was referring to the article by Jennifer Brick (2008) on *The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan*.

Whereas quantitative and qualitative baselines provided a combination of longterm progress-tracking metrics and insight into wider contexts, they did not inform counterinsurgents of immediate reactions to counter-narcotics strategies as they were being implemented — the shortcoming of which was explained by a panel-member: *“without an alerting system that gives you ‘on-the-fly’ feedback, you literally have to implement a program and wait a year to see if it worked or not. Sometimes [these programs are] a multi-million dollar effort! That’s a lot of money to put on the table to just ‘spin the dice on’ [and] ‘play and pray’ it makes an impact!”*⁵³

Bridging the gap between longterm metrics and immediate feedback, panel-members raised the advantages of two other sources of ‘population-centric understanding’.

‘Atmospherics’ provided insight into ‘unknown-unknowns’ and questions counterinsurgents did not know to ask on surveys. As explained by an Atmospherics Manager who had previously supported counter-narcotics efforts in Helmand: *“A lot of this complexity was captured. We got feedback like ‘I grew cotton last year but it sits here and rots’ because they couldn’t sell it. It brought up complexities like ‘I have a debt to the Taliban and now I have to sell my daughter to them to pay it’. It brought up the ‘mirab issue’ (water-controllers). We even seen reporting on ‘cold storage’ (a lack of facilities that could refrigerate produce) and why basic food-stuffs — melons, grapes, all that — were rotting before they could get it to market. [These] could’ve all been engagement opportunities for us... but [they] were missed because the data didn’t reach the right people (i.e. counter-narcotics decision-makers, especially those outside the counterinsurgent chain-of-command).”*⁵⁴

⁵³ Panel Interview, Population-Centric Knowledge Producers, 2018.

⁵⁴ Panel Interview, Population-Centric Knowledge Producers, 2018.

Where ‘atmospherics’ retained the potential to alert decision-makers of unknown complexities, ‘Social Science Research Analysis’ (SSRA) afforded opportunities to further deconstruct these complexities. As explained by an SSRA Social Scientist, *“To my knowledge, we never conducted a study on farmers or their cultivation practices; however, with our ability to hone in on certain segments [and] demographics of the population (for focused interviews), that was certainly an option suitable for our capability”*.⁵⁵ Providing an example: *“Focus-groups offer a lot of options: why certain [counter-narcotics strategies] were effective or not; the decision making-cycle on what and what not to grow, with all the considerations that go into it; even, simply, interviewing on what actually grows in their area with the least amount of effort; and determining ‘farm-gate’ prices on what compensation they get for different crops... It’s not hard to determine; you just have to know what questions to ask — ‘ask and we shall field’ —but, maybe, if the right questions had been asked... I’m confident we could have captured it; and, perhaps, prevented a few of these [counter-narcotics efforts] that were doomed to crash and burn before they took off from the runway.”*⁵⁶

Returning to ‘strategy’, this case-example on ‘countering-narcotics’ evidences the following ‘lesson encountered’ as a pathway enabled through effective sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ to inform counterinsurgent decision-makers: *localised understanding unravels complex problems by identifying deeper underlying conditions (‘root-causes’) over more obvious surface issues (‘symptoms’) and offering participant-generated solutions as options to incorporate into strategy.*

⁵⁵ Interview, PC, SSRA Social Scientist, 2018.

⁵⁶ Interview, PC, SSRA Social Scientist, 2018.

Proper sources of ‘population-centric understanding’, those suitable to unravelling the complexity of the issue, facilitates the avoidance of strategy orientations that suit the internal culture of the counterinsurgency apparatus but fail to address the initial problem — or, worse, exacerbate it.

Explained by David Mansfield in relation to the HFZ initiative: *“The politically charged nature of stabilisation, the ‘need to do something’ and the pressure to report success deters more systematic evaluation of programme implementation.”*⁵⁷ As consequence: *“The HFZ was a short-term plan that was extended again and again by officials whose tenure was often no longer in length and who had little concern for longer term effects and sustainability. The longer-term implications of the HFZ were never considered or, if they were, were largely brushed aside in favour of ‘more of the same’... The combination of an intense pressure to act compounded by an intense pressure to be a reporting success do not make for the best decisions.”*⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Mansfield 2019: 63. Continued by Mansfield (2019: 63): *“Political pressure, military imperatives and short-term staff assignments prevail in stabilisation settings. These often lead to suboptimal programme design where insufficient consideration is given to the prevailing socio-economic, political and environmental factors that impact outcomes.”*

⁵⁸ Mansfield 2019: 63. Furthered by Mansfield (2019: 63) in relation to ‘progress tracking’: *“There is a need to move away from measuring the success and failure of counternarcotics efforts based on the annual counting of hectares of opium poppy grown. It has not proven to be helpful and has distorted policy discussions”*. This is reinforced by the SIGAR (2018: 171) report on US Counter-Narcotics Efforts: *“The counternarcotics performance metrics used in Afghanistan, particularly the overemphasis on annual estimates of poppy cultivation and eradication, contributed to ineffective policy decisions. For U.S. policymakers, poppy cultivation served as the primary proxy indicator of the success or failure of counternarcotics efforts. The pressure to demonstrate progress, as measured by cultivation levels, led to the push for increased eradication and cultivation bans. This overemphasis on cultivation crowded out other indicators that could have given policymakers a more complete, nuanced picture of narcotics-related challenges in Afghanistan. The failure to develop a comprehensive set of indicators meant policymakers lacked accurate data on which interventions worked and which ones failed. This overwhelming focus on cultivation as a performance metric did not align well with the U.S. strategic interest in cutting off insurgent groups’ funding from the drug trade.”*

To build effective solutions that have a chance to resolve Afghanistan's complex 'opium problem', Mansfield explains that: *"Development programmes that offer farmers real livelihoods alternatives would need to have as many characteristics as possible that 'mimic' the attractions of the opium economy... [and] avoid adopting a strategy of simply attempting to replace the relatively high level of income".*⁵⁹

This sentiment was reinforced by members of the Helmand Interview Panel who identified the successful attributes of the opium-economy operated by drug-traffickers and insurgents: the provision of pre-season loans; the distribution of seeds and fertiliser; and, most importantly, the guaranteed purchase of the entirety of the crop yielded. Summarised by a panel-member: *"We can grow you anything! Anything you want! We are farmers! We will grow for you anything you can buy from us. Tell me what this is and my fields will be full of this [crop]; but if you are not buying it, next year my fields will have poppy [again]. There is no choice for us."*⁶⁰

Reflected upon by an interviewed counter-narcotics practitioner: *"You got to wonder — when you try to wrap your head around what \$7 Billion of wasted effort even looks like — how much would we've saved if we just bought their wheat crops from them at opium prices?"*⁶¹

⁵⁹ Mansfield 2019: 79. Furthered by Mansfield (2019: 77), successful counter-narcotics strategies would have to implement appropriate development responses that suited local realities across an array of local actors involved in poppy cultivation: *"Opium poppy cultivating households are diverse and dynamic, and their decision as to how much land to dedicate to opium is influenced by a range of different factors — not just price. Policies and programmes that treat opium poppy farmers as homogenous will not only be ineffective, they could prove counterproductive. It is necessary to work with the diversity that exists among opium poppy cultivators. Understanding the contribution of the different socio-economic groups involved in opium poppy cultivation and the multiple benefits (for example: social, economic and political) they derive from their involvement are critical to identifying the entry points in developing effective strategies for the sustainable elimination of the crop in Afghanistan."*

⁶⁰ Interview, Counter-Narcotics Helmand Panel Interview, 2018.

⁶¹ Interview, DS, International Narcotics League Civilian Contractor, 2018.

7.2

CASE EXAMPLE: VILLAGE STABILITY & AFGHAN LOCAL POLICE

“Despite our counterinsurgency strategy that marginalized rural Afghans for nearly a decade and despite being outgunned by the Taliban, there were still many villages that were resisting the Taliban... and actively seeking help... The Special Operations planning team developed a plan to embed Green Berets into certain villages... [to] help these local villages stand up against the extremists. Under this pilot concept, Special Forces teams deployed to a few rural, Pashtun villages across Afghanistan... to help local Afghans stand up to Taliban insurgents. These Special Forces teams returned to their World War II guerrilla warfare roots of going local. They lived in the villages, wore Afghan garb, and immersed themselves in the community. They coordinated with village councils to identify, recruit, train and advise irregular defense groups against insurgent forces. These local defense groups, advised by Green Berets, were connected to the jirga council of the village... Their persistent presence as guests in the community bolstered the confidence of these fledgling irregular groups facing insurgent intimidation.” — LTC Scott Mann, US Army Special Forces Officer & Head of Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan 2009-2010.⁶²

‘Village Stability Operations’ (VSO) fall under the domain of ‘Foreign Internal Defence’ (FID) as an initiative that sought to bridge security gaps at the local level through the creation of village-level defence forces — the ‘Afghan Local Police’ (ALP) or ‘Arbaki’ — as a ‘connecting node’ to higher levels of government.⁶³ As a ‘bottom-up’ approach, the project challenged institutional orientations towards implementing ‘top-down’ solutions.

⁶² Mann 2017: 65-66. The VSO concept was initially proposed and envisioned by Seth Jones (See: Jones 2009; Jones 2010a; Jones 2010b; Jones and Munoz 2010). Linda Robinson (2013) provides a detailed account of VSO/ ALP operations in practise. See also: Dearing and Dupee 2009.

⁶³ Mann (2017: 227-228) defines ‘Foreign Internal Defense’ as a “whole-of-nation, light-footprint, long-term approach to stability that has worked in a range of other countries. It is a proven way to stabilize contentious areas over the long haul. Foreign Internal Defense is well suited to deal with violent extremists who embed deep in informal clan societies around the world, whether urban or rural.” Mann (2017: 225) further provides a definition of ‘Afghan Stability’: “The Afghan government and outlying clan areas are inhospitable to violent extremists with global reach. There is a long-term balance of locally appropriate connections between the Afghan government and honor-based, clan society. These Afghan status and contract systems are resilient enough to function with minimal external U.S. and coalition involvement.”

The development of the VSO concept is described through the first-hand account of US Army Special Forces ‘Green Beret’ LTC Scott Mann who headed the initiative and authored its doctrine that he explains *“emerged from the long shadow of the flawed top-down Afghan campaign”*.⁶⁴

The US/NATO mission in Afghanistan did not begin ‘top-down’: *“The Afghan campaign started from the right direction — the bottom. The unconventional warfare utilized by Special Operations Forces shortly after September 11th, 2001 was very decisive. This approach embedded Green Berets with various ethnic clans and mobilized them to evict al-Qaida and the Taliban from the country. This grass-roots movement... created a lot of strategic momentum among Afghans, and even some hope.”*⁶⁵

However, this rapidly changed post-invasion: *“As Coalition forces poured into Afghanistan in early 2002, they began a rigid, top-down strategy of projecting control beyond the pavement. Disconnected initiatives of security, economic development, and governance... marginalized outlying rural communities and opened the door for insurgents to go local and bottom-up.”*⁶⁶

While the newly created ISAF mission convened in Kabul, *“[t]he Taliban began to flow back into Afghanistan almost as soon as they were displaced in early 2002... as coalition forces occupied the urban areas with heavy equipment behind heavily fortified firebases. Seeing*

⁶⁴ Mann 2017: 4.

⁶⁵ Mann 2017: 55. Continued by Mann (2017: 55): *“The stage was set for a small-footprint campaign to help build Afghan security capacity and foster local stability. Most Afghans, we would learn much later, were actually ready for a community-level, long-term effort geared toward helping rural Afghanistan restore its resiliency and keeping violent extremists on the other side of the border.”* According to Giustozzi (2009): *“There was huge hope for the government. People waited for three or four years, but nothing happened. Instead the cruel leaders were redeployed and supported by the government. They brought back the jihadi leaders. We thought King Zahir Shah would return and the people would be educated and prosperous.”*

⁶⁶ Mann 2017: 28.

the obvious local opportunity that we were ignoring, Taliban remnants quietly regathered their composure and began to move into the remote villages where Afghans were still waiting to see what changes our actions and the new Afghan government would bring.”⁶⁷

Meanwhile from “Kabul, the capital, and these large bases, the coalition began a rigid, top-down approach”⁶⁸ and “[b]y the time I had completed my second Afghan tour of duty in 2006, it was clear the coalition campaign in Afghanistan was unsuccessful.”⁶⁹

During this period (2005-2008), when the highest intensity combat battles with the Taliban took place, “[m]ost of our counterinsurgency forces... operated from built-up bases that provided only daylight presence in rural areas. Nightfall, the period when coalition forces were absent, was when [Taliban] retribution came calling. It’s when [insurgents] jerked people out of their homes and beat them in front of their family for supporting coalition forces. It’s when children were taken. It’s when night letters were dropped at village mosques warning of more intimidation to come if folks cooperated with us. In short, we weren’t in the places that mattered most (rural areas), at the times that mattered most (day and night), and to the people who mattered most — locals.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mann 2017: 48-49.

⁶⁸ Mann 2017: 47. Mann (2017: 47) described the emotive reasoning for this top-down orientation he calls ‘pissed off and drawn in’: “there were mitigating reasons for this top-down approach, which are easy to criticize in hindsight, but were very relevant then. Namely, we were pissed off! It’s easy to sit back and analyze now with very little emotion. What were we thinking? Why didn’t we do this? Why didn’t we do that? But when this all went down, it wasn’t as easy to separate the emotion. We had just lost 3,000 of our own people. Many of them were never recovered from that crater of rubble at Ground Zero. Most of us wanted retribution. Even Green Berets, who normally thrive on an indigenous approach, didn’t have much use for working by, with, and through the local population. Not this time. We were more interested in avenging the 9/11 attacks by putting bullets through al Qaeda and the Taliban.” Referring to this attitude as ‘scalps on the barn’, Mann (2017: 49) continues: “We put ourselves in an unwinnable situation in Afghanistan from the very beginning. Our Western bias toward government, not governance, was a major shortfall in this campaign. We imposed a government model that was perceived by most Afghans as a direct threat to their way of life.”

⁶⁹ Mann 2017: 55.

⁷⁰ Mann 2017: 50.

Failing to adopt a counterinsurgency campaign in practise, “[w]e made token efforts at ‘population-centric’ stability. Our strategy, however, was anything but population-centric and was just as damaging to our overall effort as the enemy-centric approach.”⁷¹ In doing so: “[t]he coalition campaign not only lost momentum early on, but also marginalized large swaths of [rural] society, where almost 80 percent of the population resided.”⁷²

By the height of the 2009 ‘surge’, “the flawed coalition strategy in Afghanistan was unraveling... Some leaders didn’t want to see it, but they knew it was there. Our overemphasis on [top-down approaches] and killing our way to victory was failing. Afghan security forces could not cover the security gaps, and its government couldn’t bridge the trust gaps. Special Operations Forces, many of which were caught up in these enemy-centric operations, stepped forward and proposed a new game.”⁷³ This is when “Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan embarked on a paradigm shift from their ‘scalps on the barn’ kinetic approach to a more traditional Special Forces mission of working by, with and through Afghan villagers”⁷⁴ that “we were completely ignoring, except when we needed information on a local bad guy.”⁷⁵

Here, ‘Village Stability Operations’ were born: “Under this pilot concept, Special Forces teams deployed to a few rural, Pashtun villages across Afghanistan... to help local Afghans stand up to Taliban insurgents.”⁷⁶ By “getting surrounded” and embedding

⁷¹ Mann 2017: 50.

⁷² Mann 2017: 55. Furthered by Mann (2017: 55): “By not appreciating local Afghan reality, our actions set us on a path to be effectively portrayed by violent extremists as occupiers and threats to the very people we were seeking to help.”

⁷³ Mann 2017: 64.

⁷⁴ Mann 2017: 64.

⁷⁵ Mann 2017: 3. Further described by Mann (2017: 50): “Despite the seemingly obvious lessons from Vietnam, enemy body count became trendy again. Enemy attrition was a critical measure of our success by leaders at all levels. 5 We briefed excited visiting Congressmen and other US-based senior military leaders on numbers of Taliban killed in our Command PowerPoint briefings, drone videos and Excel spreadsheets. We wanted to show that we were winning in a zero-defect leadership climate. ‘The Taliban are fractured’ was a phrase uttered by just about every senior commander returning home from deployments to brief his leadership. The phrase ‘scalps on the barn’ became common language throughout Afghanistan.”

⁷⁶ Mann 2017: 66.

directly in these villages, the innovated VSO “methodology balance[d] the more traditional US top-down emphasis on formal government support with a local approach at the community level” that facilitated overall counterinsurgent strategy in circumventing institutional hindrances (See: Table 7.2.1).⁷⁷ Mentored and trained by US Special Forces, Afghan Local Police (ALP) units “were made up of local villagers, who were paid roughly 60 percent of normal Afghan National Police salary. Each local policeman received one AK-47 assault rifle and a small amount of ammunition. Trucks, radios and motorbikes were also provided. The ALP wore uniforms and required validation from the Afghan Ministry of Interior.”⁷⁸

Table 7.2.1: Organisational Hinderances Reinforcing ‘Top Down’ Strategies

Our coalition structure, process, and norms in Afghanistan often inhibited effective action more than the extremists. Have you ever seen a NATO coalition organizational chart of Afghanistan? It's nauseating. Even the hierarchical line and block charts, intended to easily communicate chain of command and command authority, can make your head spin.

Numerous layers and seams separated organizations. Layers are the levels of command and control that rise vertically from tactical to policy and there were a bunch of them. These layers were perfectly fine if you were fighting a set-piece battle within traditional maneuver warfare. But this wasn't a traditional campaign. It was a rural insurgency that required strategic resources at local levels.

The result of all this organizational complexity was a massive structure that couldn't get out of its own way in finding a long-term solution to Afghan instability.

As observed in the field by LTC Mann, the ALP achieved the re-posturing counterinsurgents had hoped by creating a layer between themselves and local communities — reflected in Table 7.2.2 where he contrasts the reception of US/ NATO versus ALP convoys during his deployment with VSO.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Mann 2017: 217. Table 7.2.1: ‘Our coalition structure...’, (2017: 56); ‘Numerous layers...’, (2017: 57); ‘The results...’, (2017: 59).

⁷⁸ Mann 2017: 74.

⁷⁹ Mann 2017. ‘Military Convoy’, (2017: 45); ‘ALP Convoy’, (2017: 69)

Table 7.2.2: Contrasting Reception of US/NATO vs ALP Convoys

US/NATO Military Convoy	ALP Convoy
<p><i>I saw the dust from the convoy well before I saw the actual vehicles. It looked as if a massive sandstorm was approaching from the south... I was with a small Special Forces team that was meeting with a local elder... standing in the courtyard of the elder's home, as all conversation gave way to the rumbling convoy that would soon engulf us in its dust.</i></p> <p><i>The convoy grew closer. I could now discern the vehicles as they approached. There were six of them. They looked like space vehicles. Bristling with machine guns and laden with thick armor to defeat roadside bombs, they were foreboding and intimidating. This was precisely the story this convoy, and every other convoy nervously moving through the rough areas in Afghanistan wanted to communicate — 'Don't mess with us'.</i></p> <p><i>As they drove past, the only thing more out of place than the armored vehicles careening by these rural homes made of mud... were the young soldiers sitting in the vehicle turrets. Their sleek modern helmets, mirrored sunglasses, and bulging body armor made them look like the science-fiction character Robocop, whose humanity was mostly hidden behind similar-looking electronic gadgets and futuristic protective coating...</i></p> <p><i>I shifted my glance to the Afghan villagers I had been talking with. Some had gone inside their homes at the sight of these vehicles. Several children cowered behind mud walls and mulberry trees, peering out at the ominous mechanical creatures. Some of the younger men glared intently at the vehicles, lost in simmering anger. The elder I had been meeting with never looked up. He just shook his head sadly from side to side. It was in that moment I knew we were in danger of losing this war.</i></p>	<p><i>I joined my commander... on my first of many visits to a community where Green Berets were embedded among locals... in south Afghanistan. Our helicopter landed outside the village where we were met by bearded Green Berets and Afghans.</i></p> <p><i>At a glance, and by design, it was hard to tell them apart. They threw us in the back of a troop carrier for the bumpy ride back to their Afghan compound on the outskirts of the village. As we made our way to the embed site, I couldn't help but notice how the Afghan local defenders were moving with ease through the village on their motorbikes. They stopped traffic at every intersection, but not in the obtrusive way done by menacing American convoys bristling with guns and armor. They were cordial with the locals and would smile and talk to them. But I could sense they were also all business.</i></p> <p><i>This was different than the countless security convoys I'd been on throughout Afghanistan in past combat tours. This one wasn't met with scowls from passerby or rocks thrown by children, as was often the case when we lumbered about in our big armored personnel carriers, which put light years between the locals and us. I watched as children from [REDACTED NAME OF VILLAGE] ran out to greet the local defenders.</i></p> <p><i>Our convoy was met by waves, cheers and smiles from locals who seemed proud to have their men securing the town. The local defenders, polite but firm, kept curious onlookers a reasonable distance from the convoy.</i></p>

Zeroing-in on the underlying issues affecting strategy, LTC Mann asserts: *“there was tremendous skepticism around going local. Some leaders feared the growth of more rogue militias and others feared giving special operators more resources and autonomy out in the hinterlands where it would be more difficult to monitor them.”*⁸⁰

Wary of the risks of inadvertently creating ‘rogue militias’ that could turn against the government and hesitant to decentralise decision-making authority to lower-levels of command, LTC Mann explains: *“There wasn’t much coalition love for this program early on. In fact, even some special operators disliked it. Many Green Berets preferred to continue targeting extremists instead of living among locals. Conventional commanders and interagency members, especially Department of State, opposed the program.”*⁸¹

In practise, the Afghan Local Police (ALP) element of the project was highly successful in some areas but failed abysmally in others — drawing harsh criticism, especially in cases where ALP units were only loosely mentored, if at all, by overseeing VSO Special Forces Teams.⁸²

LTC Mann cautions that this is an inherent risk of establishing local defence forces: *“if not properly managed in transition, [they] can devolve into rogue elements that prey on civil society and destabilize local areas. They can make things worse than when you started.”*⁸³

⁸⁰ Mann 2017: 66-67.

⁸¹ Mann 2017: 68.

⁸² The International Crisis Group provides a comprehensive assessment on *The Future of the Afghan Local Police* (See: ICG 2015). Critiques and further discussions on the effectiveness of the VSO/ALP programs and encountered challenges can be found in: Edwards 2020; Hulslander and Spivey 2012; Saum-Manning 2012.

⁸³ Mann 2017: 140. Continued by Mann (2017: 140) *“In transition, demobilization of irregular local forces is a particularly challenging security issue. It involves much more than just taking back the guns from militias. Demobilization involves reintegrating local defenders back into civil society.”*

Notwithstanding these risks, the “five-year Afghan Local Police program was gaining traction as a major component of the ISAF Afghan campaign plan. Afghan Local Police numbers went from several hundred to 15,000, and from six village stability platforms to one hundred and sixteen throughout Afghanistan” as they increasingly became seen as a way to cover the pending US/NATO withdrawal.⁸⁴

Zooming-in to local actor perspectives, two separate interview panels on ALP performance were established from two districts in Southern Afghanistan with considerably different local dynamics — referred to respectively as ‘District/Panel A’ and ‘District/Panel B’ — and each with a different history of having *arbaki*, or local tribal defence forces, as part of their customary institutions.

‘District A’ was home to a historically strong and united Pashtun tribe where a VSO Special Forces team had previously trained and mentored locally recruited *arbaki* who were selected by, and answered to, the local village council.⁸⁵

In contrast, local conditions in ‘District B’ were vastly different. Although not far from the other district, this district comprised an amalgamation of disparate groups (as opposed to a single or unified group) where local Pashtun tribes were significantly fractured and weakened, customary institutions at the village level for maintaining local order and security were weak or absent, there existed no historical precedent of a strong locally formed *arbaki* for community protection, and where significant battles between US/NATO/Afghan forces and the Taliban routinely occurred.

⁸⁴ Mann 2017: 74.

⁸⁵ Regarding the oversight and mentoring aspect of the programme, Mann (2017: 66) explains: “This added more oversight than putting local defenders under a single militia commander. It was also a much more effective way to vet potential local defenders. The community would be responsible for caring for their logistical needs, which now included weapons and ammunition. There was a unique risk control measure here. By residing locally, these Green Beret advisors provided responsible oversight against rogue militias. They also provided the technical skill and training for these forces.”

‘District A’ panel-members described an overall positive experience with the establishment of ALP sites throughout their district. As introduced by a senior resident of the district: *“[During the 2001 invasion] we helped the Americans rid Kandahar of the Taliban. We kept them running. Our American friends (referring to US Special Forces) gave us [BDUs] (referring to ‘Battle Dress Uniforms’) and we made good security for all of Kandahar.”*⁸⁶ Shortly after, as official Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) began to be trained in Kabul, the panel-member recalled how their militia was disbanded: *“The Taliban remembered us for doing this; we paid a very high price for this. The [Afghan National Army] was not here in this place; there was no one to defend us.”*⁸⁷ Occurring slowly over a several year gap, the arrival of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) units did not provide the necessary security expected: *“Sometimes they would fight the Taliban, [but] not always. [And] if you look at these soldiers faces, they are not from here — they are Tajik, Uzbek, Pashtuns from different places — they don’t care so much about us here. They care more to be safe (themselves).”*⁸⁸ This latter condition was an advantage of the ALP: *“When you must think, who is more loyal than the man fighting for his family? Who is from here? And this is his home? This is the natural way we should defend ourselves.”*⁸⁹

Panel-members from ‘District A’ cited how the locally-sourced defenders garnered confidence amongst village members: *“In this area, we have good experience with [ALP]. They live here, so they are knowing who is normal [and] who is not belonging*

⁸⁶ Interview, ‘District A’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁸⁷ Interview, ‘District A’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁸⁸ Interview, ‘District A’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁸⁹ Interview, ‘District A’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

[here]. They're good to say, 'you should leave' or to not bother normal villagers."⁹⁰ This familiarity with local routine and personalities helped reduce negative interactions with security forces, both foreign and Afghan: "[ALP] are having good respect for people here, and know how to deal with them, since they are from here and are knowing these people. They are knowing difference between good people they know are from here and are not a threat and the people who are not from here. The foreigners are not knowing this. To them, maybe everyone is a threat because they are not knowing who good people are... and they miss the bad ones who are making harm for us."⁹¹

Although higher-level ANA and ANP were better equipped and armed, 'District A' panel-members recounted how their loyalties were suspect: "I am not trusting the ANA for my security because their family is not living here. Where are their families? Many who join the ALP, they want a secure living for their families. They don't want to move far away to join ANA because their families live here; they're [tied] to here, and don't want to move far away to protect other places (in the country) — there is so much to defend here, in our home [village]."⁹² This contrasts against the perceptions held of the ALP: "They are from here and they know who is everyone and who is doing the bad things. They don't cause problems for us. They defend from Taliban when they come to our village. The ANP and ANA, they are not from here. They don't know who is foreign to our area and they don't care. ALP, they are knowing these things; they are knowing who doesn't belong, so they make problems for them: they make problems for the right people."⁹³

⁹⁰ Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹¹ Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹² Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹³ Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

In relation to oversight, 'District A' panel-members noted that: *"the foreigners were here to train them and help them to do a good job, to not cause problems. [And] if we have problems, we know we can go to our [district or village council] to have this problem fixed. They are not lawless, they are answering to the whole community"*.⁹⁴ As a community defence force, 'District A' panel-members also cited how this bolstered their neutrality in the long-run: *"Many things are changing in Afghanistan. We must change with Afghanistan when it changes. When we have our own ALP protecting us, it is not meaning we support foreigners or the Taliban or anyone. They are a force to protect the village. Everyone should be understanding this: if government kills our ALP; if Talibans kill our ALP; they are enemies of our people!"*⁹⁵

Discussions amongst panel-members in 'District B' shared a less positive experience with ALP located throughout their district, often expressing mixed or negative sentiments towards their contribution to local security.

Unlike the ALP in 'District A', ALP in 'District B' were not selected by a village or district council but rather were recruited directly by, and answered to, the Ministry of Interior: *"They wanted to create an ALP, so they found anyone — lazy, corrupt, and useless people with no purpose. These are not quality candidates. They are lazy — they work with Taliban if its benefit to them, they work with foreigners — depends on the day!"*⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹⁵ Interview, 'District A' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹⁶ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

Corruption was cited as one of the most concerning aspects that directly affected local residents: *"They're easily bribed. They don't make much money so they think bribe is part of their job."*⁹⁷ Furthered by another panel-member who expressed that ALP often exceeded their role as 'community protectors' and too often interfered in the civil affairs of villagers: *"We have problems, like you can think these water shortages (irrigation disputes); but, it is not for some police to decide. We have people to decide: it is our elders — this is where we take our [disputes]; not for police who takes bribes."*⁹⁸ Describing a routine example of extortion, a 'District B' panel-member explained: *"I had to pay a fee to ALP when I was growing opium. I understand this because opium is illegal. But now, when I'm growing regular crops — corn and wheat — ALP are also demanding money."*⁹⁹

In such cases, panel-members discerned how it is often hard to distinguish between the actions of the ALP and those of the Taliban. As expressed: *"Their corruption makes a big distance between our people and the government. What is difference from them and Taliban? They tell us to pay taxes to them (bribes), and if we don't pay they beat us. If we don't pay taxes to Taliban, they beat us. What is [the] difference?"*¹⁰⁰ Such instances were related to their lack of oversight by local councils: *"No one is looking at them (referring to oversight). If they find a man growing opium, they beat him. We know this is not allowed, but who is to tell them? We are simple villagers; there is no one to report this [to]."*¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹⁸ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

⁹⁹ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

Relating to loyalty, ‘District B’ panel-members voiced concern that ALP units would defect to the Taliban: *“They used to be Taliban, how can I respect these men or trust them? When things get bad, they sometimes even are joining the Taliban. I’m afraid they will tell them that I am a worker for the government. They can never be trusted.”*¹⁰² However, several ‘District B’ panel-members defended the ALP as playing a crucial role in local security while also facing significant hardship: *“ANP can leave, but our ALP have nowhere to go. For corruption they are bad, but for security they are good. It’s hard for ALP; they live here so they don’t want to destroy the village. When ANA and Taliban fight, they are okay to destroy the village — they don’t live here, they don’t care. But ALP, they know these are people’s homes: sometimes they’re afraid to destroy Taliban [because] they know it destroys homes and fields.”*¹⁰³ Furthered by another panel-member: *“When the foreigners were here, they held these posts. But when they left, they gave them to ALP, and tell them ‘now you defend this’. But this is not right. ALP are simple people. They don’t have planes and bombs like foreigners. They live in village, and if Taliban finds out who they are, they will have big problem. It’s not right to expect a man who has a rifle and family to fight what a man who has an airplane and no family here can’t fight. They are not trained for this!”*¹⁰⁴

Although widely viewed as corrupt and poorly trained, ‘District B’ panel-members identified benefits of the added layer of security offered by the ALP’s presence that had not existed previously: *“There are IEDs on the roads and I can’t bring my agriculture to the market. The ALP help find these IEDs, they know where they are*

¹⁰² Interview, ‘District B’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰³ Interview, ‘District B’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, ‘District B’ Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

placed, and they are travelling these roads also. The ALP help me avoid them to bring my agriculture to the market with safety. I'm very happy for this."¹⁰⁵ This was furthered by another 'District B' panel-member who seen the ALP as the best security force to call when facing an imminent threat: *"If I see Taliban in my village, first I'm calling is [ALP]. If you call ANA/ANP, they don't care so much: they are safe. These ALP are knowing the Taliban are hunting for them. They want to know! And they come! They're shooting at them to make them leave... If they don't leave, ALP for sure are first who they will kill!"*¹⁰⁶

However, 'District B' panel-members expressed mixed opinions on oversight of the ALP by foreign forces. Arguing its benefit, one panel-member explained: *"Having ALP is better for our area because they make better peace. The foreigners want them here. If we have better peace, we have better funding from the government and the foreigners."*¹⁰⁷ Another panel-member raised concern about the lack of oversight and what would happen after the ALP would no longer be needed: *"They have some power, but what will happen after? Will they give up power? Or choose to make problems for us? I don't like these options."*¹⁰⁸ Other panel-members praised their lack of oversight saying that foreign forces prevented ALP from being as brutal as they should be to defend local villages, as described: *"I don't understand. When Taliban find ALP, they kill them. When ALP find Taliban, why don't they kill them? They should be doing this if they want to protect us. If not, they have no purpose."*¹⁰⁹ Disagreeing with the necessity for brutality, another panel-

¹⁰⁵ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

member commented how ALP required to be corrupt to keep community balance: *“Afghanistan is not America. Sometimes it is best for safety to make some agreements with your most dangerous enemy... keep him from causing the harm you can't stop. Foreigners aren't allowing ALP to do this; [but], sometimes this is what we need here.”*¹¹⁰

Reflecting back upon strategy, LTC Mann asserts that the formation of the ALP served a vital function as a connecting node to higher levels, but cautioned that local defence forces *“are only effective if they are truly local, if they treat the people well, and if the community to which they are accountable accepts them as part of their social structure.”*¹¹¹ Furthered by Afghan Deputy Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development Tariq Ismati: *“If the Arbakai are put in situations where they are not trusted by the whole population, they will be seen as militias rather than Arbakai.”*¹¹²

According to LTC Mann, *“The popularity of ALP was a double-edged sword. The Afghan program helped improve security and overall stability in some very contentious areas. It was, however, growing too fast”*¹¹³ and serves as a *“prime example of a local security problem that was handed off way too soon. ALP focused exclusively on security, while omitting the remaining two-thirds of the stability equation, economic development and governance. The effects of this will be felt negatively in Afghanistan for years to come.”*¹¹⁴ Much of this was due to higher-levels of command seeing the ALP component of VSO as a viable way to cover the looming US/NATO withdrawal, as described: *“By*

¹¹⁰ Interview, 'District B' Interview Panel on Afghan Local Police (ALP) Performance, 2018.

¹¹¹ Mann 2017: 236-237.

¹¹² Quoted in: Mann 2017: 237.

¹¹³ Mann 2017: 75.

¹¹⁴ Mann 2017: 141.

early 2012, there was enormous top-down pressure from NATO headquarters to create as many Afghan Local Police as possible. Soon, the entire character of ALP shifted from building voluntary community resiliency to paid militias covering the US exit from Afghanistan.”¹¹⁵

Although the initiative experienced setbacks, it achieved strategic effects, as described by LTC Mann: *“going local scared the hell out of al Qa’ida and the Taliban. It rallied rural villages that had long since caved under extremist domination. It brought inter-agency and multinational parties to a level of collaboration never before seen in the entire fourteen-year Afghan campaign.”¹¹⁶* However, *“as the US withdrawal began in earnest in 2013, SOF advisors — the only responsible oversight to these local forces — were pulled out of rural villages.”¹¹⁷*

Furthered by LTC Mann: *“Village Stability advisors empowering resilient local actors to solve their own problems was the essence of rural stability — not armed militias. Many of the allegations and concerns associated with Afghan Local Police happened as the program grew too fast, expanding to areas where tribal society didn’t exist, and SOF advisors were pulled out. Assuming the US will continue to pull its residual forces out... no one really knows if these Afghan Local Police will be able to stand on their own. Armed groups in Afghan rural areas without advisors have a tendency to go rogue. Time will tell.”¹¹⁸*

¹¹⁵ Mann 2017: 75. Mann (2017: 76) expands the difference in these approaches through an interview with a VSO SF Team Member: *“When we first conducted Village Stability in [REDACTED NAME OF VILLAGE] back in 2009, it was bottom-up. The community was completely involved in the process. We were invited to live among the people and there was almost no conflict between the villagers and us. We worked together to help the village stand up against the insurgents... But when we attempted to establish Afghan Local Police in 2013 in eastern Afghanistan, it was completely top-down and based more on numbers, with no buy-in from the locals. The result was that we were in a gunfight in those villages every time we attempted to establish communication with the village elders and the program never really took off.”*

¹¹⁶ Mann 2017: 4.

¹¹⁷ Mann 2017: 74. Mann (2017: 75-76) continues that: *“As tempting as it might be to rapidly grow local defense numbers, this approach doesn’t lend itself to long-term stability, and... can actually make things more unstable. In January 2014, only a handful of VSO sites remained. This was because VSO was a poorly understood program. Many of the senior leaders who initially embraced long-term village stability unwittingly killed it later on as they focused too much on rapidly growing the security component of local militias from Afghan Local Police and removing SOF advisors from the villages.”*

¹¹⁸ Mann 2017: 76. Related to ‘resiliency’, Dearing (2017) provides an example of a ‘peoples uprising’ occurring in Ghazni Province.

In reflection of ‘understanding’, the ‘knowledge-producer’ panel provided discussion on which sources of ‘population-centric’ understanding were more effective at unravelling complexity to inform decision-makers in a manner that aligned with the insights provided by the local-actor participants interviewed in this case-example.

Quantitative Public-Opinion Polling provided national and regional breakdowns indicating where the ALP were considered ‘favourable’ or ‘unfavourable’. As explained by a panel-member: *“At the national level, you’re going to see a mixed result that’s blurred; but, when you get down to the specific district levels where the VSO sites are located, you’re going to see a clear ‘red/green’ breakdown of where [ALP] are liked or hated — this can start to give you an idea of where the problems are.”*¹¹⁹ However, such results were often counterintuitive, as furthered by the panel-member: *“Between surveys, there’s a big difference in how the question is asked, [for example]: [Q1] ‘How favourable do you see the ALP in your area?’; over, [Q2] ‘Who would you call if you need assistance?’ — these are going to generate different data-sets. In the first [Q1] you could get that locals see [the] ALP as unprofessional or lack training but in the other [Q2] you might still see ALP get a higher mention rate — it tells a story that locals might not like [the ALP] but still trust them as the first line of defence if they’re in danger.”*¹²⁰

Although ‘red/green’ breakdowns at the district level provided a source of investigation of where potential problems may lie, according to another panel-member, *“the figures are misleading; they don’t tell you ‘why’... [and] analysts are left to*

¹¹⁹ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹²⁰ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

speculate at face-value".¹²¹ Describing the irregularities of survey responses, a panel-member continued: *"The ALP never poll well. Nationally, you can get a spread of where people view [the ALP] favourably or dis-favourably; but, even this is misleading. They could be favourable in one area because they're providing good security or because they're corrupt and let people do whatever they want. They could be unfavourable in an area because they're corrupt and working with the Taliban or because they're actually doing their jobs.... There's a story behind the numbers that the numbers alone don't tell."*¹²²

Panel-members described how the 'atmospherics' programme provided *"context behind the numbers"* by shedding light on complexities at the local level, according to a former Atmospherics Analyst who furthered: *"Red/Green indications aren't enough if you lack grounded context on 'why' [the] numbers are the way they are. What are the local conditions? Is it a problem with a certain team or strategy? Is there an animosity brewing because of personality conflicts? Or because ISAF had a recent or past negative interaction with the locals? Are attitudes unfavourable because the ALP officers are corrupt? Not corrupt enough? Aligned with the Taliban? Not aligned with the Taliban enough? This was the type of insight generated on a day-to-day basis in the atmospherics [reporting] that gave the required context behind those numbers; especially, in the areas where you need it most — the 'red' areas — that can be the hardest to determine because the issues can be too sensitive to be communicated to a pollster when under the 'watchful eye' of whoever in that village might be the source of the grievance."*¹²³

¹²¹ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

¹²² Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

¹²³ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

Describing the importance of this type of insight to dispel counterintuitive correlations between negative or positive polling trends, the Atmospheric Analyst continued: “[Atmospherics] reporting regularly indicated the difference in a given area if the ALP were disliked because they were simply corrupt, not doing their job, doing it too well; if they were popular because they were supporting the Taliban in a pro-Taliban area; unpopular because they were driving out Taliban in a pro-Taliban area; if locals just simply didn’t like the idea of being governed by anyone; [or], if locals felt the presence of any security force disrupted delicate tolerance to ignore and be left alone by insurgents, fearing it could bring unwanted attention — these differences are absolute key for any [decision-maker] to know and give them real indication on how things are actually playing out.”¹²⁴ Furthered by a former Atmospheric Programme Director: “When you consider ‘bottom-up’ approaches, this is where the real benefit lies: there’s a lot of noise going on in a [counterinsurgent] headquarters; a lot of data overload and mixed data-streams. Atmospheric [reporting] gave the highest level decision-makers clear ground-truth situational awareness of what’s going on right down to the local level — it truly bridges top and bottom.”¹²⁵

Advised by Human Terrain Teams, embedded VSO Special Forces operators also proved to be an effective source of ‘population-centric understanding’ that assisted in bridging the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ levels of strategy developed in headquarters with localised understanding through a form of ‘situated learning’ established by their immersion in Afghan villages.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹²⁵ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹²⁶ Introduced by Lave & Wenger (1991: 14), the concept of ‘situated learning’ “takes as its focus the relationship between learning and the social situation in which it occurs”. As an extension of the immersive ethnographic method developed by Malinowski (1922), ‘situated learning’ focuses on the process of a newcomer to a ‘community of practice’ absorbing ‘modes of action and meaning’ through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in the setting of that particular community as learned from members of that community.

LTC Mann describes the setting of an SF VSO Team Leader who pioneered the effort in Eastern Afghanistan: *“He built trust and rapport at the grass-roots levels with traditional clan leaders. And he was able to do this because he lived among the people. He didn’t live down the road. He didn’t live in a firebase. He lived with a small infantry squad in a mud compound, among the villagers... He met the Afghan tribal folk where they lived, he didn’t try to change them. He embraced local realities and spent countless hours listening to stories of how these... tribesmen fought against the Soviets. He had endeared himself at the most fundamental level in this harsh... environment.”*¹²⁷

Continued by LTC Mann, a SF VSO Team Leader had a similar experience while embedded in a particularly volatile district in Southern Afghanistan where he *“pushed his [team] to do more than just look for bad guys”, as described: “They worked closely with their Human Terrain Team advisor... to identify... what was destabilizing [the local area]. Each team member, during every patrol, had certain responsibilities for questions and fact-finding with locals they would encounter along the way. At every opportunity, each team member chatted up the locals. Every Green Beret was a sensor and a key participant in solving this puzzle... Often locals would share things with lower-ranking team members that they would not share with the team commander. This diverse perspective was important to getting a clear picture of local reality... Slowly, the real stability picture of the village started to come into focus.”*¹²⁸ The results of this approach allowed the VSO team to identify

¹²⁷ Mann 2017: 66. See also: Gant 2009; Gant 2014; Tyson 2009. For critique, see: Edwards 2020.

¹²⁸ Mann 2017: 84-85. Further describing the volatile setting at the onset of the SF VSO Team’s deployment: *“They were up against a daunting challenge. They were trying to establish bottom-up stability in an area that had been hard hit by years of conflict. Tribal tensions were running high and the district government didn’t give these folks the time of day. [Team members] were outgunned and outnumbered. The compound where they lived on the edge of the village came under multiple attacks from Taliban fighters. There were nonstop intelligence streams telling him they were living under the threat of even more catastrophic attacks against his small team.”* (Mann 2017: 83)

local sources of instability that they could bring in higher-level resources to resolve and facilitate cooperation between conflicting groups resident to the area — the causes of which had previously been unknown and left unaddressed.¹²⁹

Concluded by LTC Mann: *“By no longer ‘driving to work,’ SOF were now filling [decision-makers’] ears with all kinds of social grievances that were de-stabilizing these areas. These weren’t just trivial stability grievances. These were life and death issues in a resource-constrained... society. In this environment, the stakes were always high. These sources of instability... [had been] kindling for violent extremists fanning the flames of exploitation.”*¹³⁰

Panel-members who had taken part in VSO missions also highlighted the importance of works produced by ‘Academic Anthropologists’, who had performed ethnographic studies on local governance systems, and ‘Afghan Research Institutes’, such as TLO that produced area studies providing historical and recent context regarding local dynamics and which systems had been more effective in a particular area, as described: *“understanding the history of the community, their history of having Arbaki, [and] what models had worked in the past — in that specific community — were usually the greatest indicators of success... and probably, looking back, failure as well”*.¹³¹

¹²⁹ LTC Mann (2017: 84-86) continued the explanation: *“One was a simmering tribal tension between the majority tribe that owned all the land, and the minority landless tribe which was subsistence farming on the village outskirts. [The team] applied a new approach to overcoming the trust deficit of this clan feud. Rather than meet with them together in the shouting matches that they had been hosting up to this point, they now met with each tribal group separately. They built trust as mediators and moved incrementally toward seeking more local knowledge of their grievances.”* Further, the team *“identified several local economic development opportunities for irrigation waterways that spanned both tribes. Poor water management was causing severe agricultural problems for both factions. Neither tribe, however, could get past their honor-based feuds to repair the shared waterway and increase agricultural yields.”* Reaching out to *“USAID experts for assistance in how to repair the water system”*, the team leader was able to leverage his *“local credibility to persuade each rival tribal leader to work on his respective part of the waterway until the waterway connected... [that] prove[d] to be a catalyst that opened cooperation between the two rival tribal leaders. Before long, local defense forces recruited from the villages and both tribal leaders were participating in district governor meetings, speaking with one voice on their issues and needs with the Afghan government.”*

¹³⁰ Mann 2017: 72.

¹³¹ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

In summary discussion, panel-members highlighted the importance of integrating the various sources of ‘population-centric understanding’: ‘top-down’ quantitative programmes indicated where problems may lie; ‘bottom-up’ sources of understanding provided the necessary context required for the ‘test-and-adjust’ of strategy. As described by a panel-member: *“This type of integration is the difference between scrapping an initiative (like VSO/ALP) because you don’t know why its not working from a ‘top-down’ perspective, or fine-tuning it ‘bottom-up’ until its delivering the intended results in each location across the spectrum”*.¹³²

Returning to ‘strategy’, this case-example on ‘Afghan Local Police’ evidences the following ‘lesson encountered’ as a pathway enabled through effective sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ to inform counterinsurgent decision-makers: *‘bottom-up’ understanding enables ‘bottom-up’ strategies that tailor solutions to localised issues — mitigating the ineffectiveness of weak national ‘blanket’ strategies driven from the ‘top-down’*.

Overviewing successes and challenges, LTC Mann reflects: *“This grass-roots local Village Stability initiative ran from late 2009 until 2013. ALP continues to this day, but without local oversight by US advisors. Admittedly, this program was a bit like building an airplane in flight. We achieved significant progress, but also made plenty of mistakes... we can glean for our future use in the triumphs and failures of this program’s development. We can learn as much from the rise and fall of going local in Afghanistan as we can from the overt effects it achieved.”*¹³³

¹³² Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹³³ Mann 2017: 64. The success of the ALP in many areas was also noted by the Taliban, as explained by Michael Semple (2018:np): *“In marked contrast to what they announced in April [2016], the Taliban have not prioritized attacking US forces. Instead, they have targeted the so-called arbakai—local militias assigned to protect pro-government rural areas. Across Afghanistan’s northern provinces, the Taliban measure their progress in the hundreds of these militiamen that they have killed, forced into surrender, or pushed back into bigger towns.”*

When informed by situated understanding, VSO teams were able re-orientate flawed approaches that overlooked local realities, as recounted by LTC Mann: *"All of us were in such a rush to get into Afghanistan that we didn't take any time to really try to understand it. Instead, we read a copy of 'The Bear Went Over the Mountain', a book that chronicles the tactical lessons from the Soviet war, and then we were on our way. We ignored the local realities of Afghanistan... Our ignorance of [Afghan] society and other local realities, such as government corruption and incompetence, prevailed through most of the Afghan campaign. It unfortunately still holds true in our engagements around the world... We ignore it, because it's hard."*¹³⁴

However, the consequences of abandoning these lessons and once again ignoring local realities have been dire, as explained by LTC Mann, where failure to understand limits strategy approaches for decision-makers: *"Since Counterinsurgency (COIN) didn't succeed in Afghanistan, Counter-Terrorism (CT) is emerging as the primary mission... CT in Afghanistan consists of drone strikes and Special Operations Raids. Even our host nation capacity building is focused solely on direct action forces, an approach that has failed for over a decade. These types of attacks on terror cells are not as clean as they appear on grainy screens in command centers."*¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Mann 2017: 47. Mann (2017: 58) furthers that 'ignoring local realities' is also endemic of the 'hierarchical command climate', as described: *"Rather than report the hard ground-level facts, commanders at the levels above the problem owner often filtered reports with 'modified' information meant to make the next level of command happy. Telling the emperor (or in this case, a senior leader) that he's butt naked in the sands of Afghanistan was not a viable course of action among most subordinate military and civilian leaders. Rendering bad news or contrarian viewpoints to the chain of command, even if it was intended to provide leaders with perspective on local reality, was a quick path to a short career in government service."*

¹³⁵ Mann 2017: 226. Mann (2017:26) furthers how these approaches further reinforce local malice against US/NATO forces: *"Local village populations where extremists live, view drones and surgical raids as an apostate's way of warfare."* This is reinforced by Giustozzi (2009: 55): *"Criticism vented at the foreign contingents involved in the counterinsurgency has focused on a reliance on massive firepower, mostly derived from the air, a lack of attention for developing local knowledge and familiarity, and failure to maintain whatever knowledge was accumulated through the successive rotations of personnel."* See also: Kaplan 2013.

Furthered by an interviewed counterinsurgent, this shift could have been prevented if the institution continued to develop ‘bottom-up’ solutions rather than return to those easier to control from the ‘top-down’: *“There’s no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution for Afghanistan and, because of that, there’s never going to be a working strategy that can be controlled and directed ‘top-down’. VSO was really effective in some areas but higher-ups got skittish about the places it wasn’t. If it’s working in some areas, but not others, you don’t scrap the entire program. You have to figure out why it’s working where it is working; why it’s not working where it isn’t. You have to replicate successes and see if you can apply those successes to others... or figure out why they’re different. Each place has its own very niche, localised, conditions... You’ll never get an easy ‘it worked over here, so it’ll work over there’ scenario where you can just ‘copy-and-paste’ a solution across the board. No, we have to take the time to ‘test-and-adjust’... There’s just no patience for that.”*¹³⁶

Such tailored, ‘bottom-up’, approaches are very applicable to Afghanistan, as reaffirmed by a member of the Local Afghan Actor panel: *“I can say all my life, if you turn in a valley you will be seeing different worlds. Every small and big place is different. This is our blessing and this is our curse. For Afghanistan, it’s good because it is hard to change from bad things — it’s not so easy! Also, for Afghanistan, it’s bad: we have many different worlds, many different problems, and we need different help for every one of these places. Fixing Afghanistan — it’s also not so easy!”*¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹³⁷ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

7.3

CASE EXAMPLE: COUNTERING-PROPAGANDA

"The most important challenges that the US... and [its] Afghan partners must overcome are conveying a persuasive message to the Afghan population to buttress their military strategy; countering Taliban propaganda; and harvesting the many opportunities available to exploit Taliban... vulnerabilities." Describing the failure to do so: "This sobering predicament confronted me during a 2012 military briefing on Afghanistan... I asked a military officer why the traditional 'strategic communications' topic had been dropped from the agenda. 'Because it failed', he replied. His answer stunned me. The Coalition's eleven-year information effort... just 'did not work'." — Ambassador Peter Tomsen, Former US Special Envoy to Afghanistan from 1989-1992.¹³⁸

"[T]he United States and its allies have lost the 'battle of the story' in Afghanistan. Despite its conventional and technological superiority, the US military lost the battle for the most valuable terrain of all, the trust and confidence of the Afghans themselves... Moreover, and intimately connected to the Taliban information campaign, the US and Afghan government have failed to meet the rural Afghan population's basic expectations of improving their lives through good governance and effective security, stabilization, transition, and reconstruction efforts. And this has proved fatal in a war that turned out to be primarily a Taliban rural insurgency wrapped in the narrative of jihad." — Thomas H. Johnson, Information Operations Practitioner & Author of 'Taliban Narratives'.¹³⁹

'Counter-Propaganda' falls within the domain of Psychological Operations (PSYOP): a persuasive 'soft-power' role intended to influence environments primarily through media messaging campaigns disseminated through print, radio, television, or web-based platforms.¹⁴⁰ As its name suggests, 'counter-propaganda' operations are intended to reduce popular support for insurgent groups — an activity that is inherently 'enemy-centric' as it relies on an 'enemy' to first disseminate a form of messaging, or 'propaganda', so that the institution may reactively 'counter' it.

¹³⁸ Tomsen 2017: 38-39. Furthered by Tomsen (2017: 29): *"the US military and the Afghan government have continually failed to offer a credible narrative and stories that resonate with the Afghan people. The Taliban, on the other hand, have crafted a strong, simple, and culturally relevant [Information Operations] campaign to energize, coerce, and control the Afghan populace."*

¹³⁹ Johnson 2017: 60-61.

¹⁴⁰ Across NATO nations, the basic function of Psychological Operations (PSYOP) is also referred to as: Military Information Support Operations (MISO); Inform and Influence Activities (IIA); Information Operations (IO); Strategic Communication (STRATCOM). For additional studies see: Boudreau 2016; Foxley 2007; Garfield 2007; Giustozzi 2009; Johnson and Waheed 2011; Munoz 2012.

The US information campaign against the Taliban began before the first US troops hit the ground, beginning with ‘leaflet drops’ — a form of print media dropped from US military aircraft over the position of an enemy force.

Introduced by Thomas H. Johnson, who crafted the content of the initial leaflets to be dropped just weeks after the 9/11 attacks in 2001: *“I spent the majority of my time developing messages and narratives aimed at the Afghan Pashtun population. While the Taliban at this time were almost exclusively Pashtun, I believed that the key to our information efforts should be directed at winning the trust and confidence of the Pashtuns, especially those rural Pashtuns I expected would eventually be central to our campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In my opinion, the key to a successful Afghan [information] campaign was to separate the rural Pashtun population from the Taliban and their draconian policies. Indeed, I believed that the best way to defeat al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban was to make them ‘irrelevant’ to the Afghan villager.”*¹⁴¹

Describing the design and messaging content: *“the first leaflet I developed... consisted of a picture I found on the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) website that depicted a Taliban member of the... ‘religious police’... beating a woman with a car antenna for wearing a burka that revealed the woman’s ankles. In the forefront of the picture was a young child viewing the beating with fright in his eyes. Under this disturbing picture I wrote a caption that read: ‘Is this the future you want for your women and children?’ On the reverse side of the leaflet was a picture of al-Qaeda members with the caption: ‘Drive out foreign terrorists’.*

¹⁴¹ Johnson 2017: 43. Regarding the invasion, Johnson (2017: 42) furthers: *“It is actually interesting to note that while working on this initial Afghan information campaign, I was told that the initial air operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban were supposed to commence on Wednesday 3 October 2001. However, because the initial [Information Operations] leaflets and Commando Solo broadcasts had not been fully produced and vetted, the start of the war was delayed until Sunday 7 October 2001.”*

Here I wanted to play on the relatively xenophobic nature of many Afghans and to suggest that the US war was aimed at foreign terrorists rather than the Afghan people.”¹⁴²

Such operations, regardless of the medium through which messages are disseminated, are intended to leverage pre-existing ‘information opportunities’, as explained by Johnson: *“By 2001, while the Taliban were relatively successful in pushing their stated policies onto Afghans, they were never successful in creating jobs, creating or maintaining infrastructure, or establishing meaningful ties with the international community. This inability to bring prosperity and hope to the nation, their draconian policies toward women, along with banning traditional Pashtun pastimes (like music, movies, kite flying, the keeping of pigeons, etc.) caused a significant erosion of Afghan support. In light of this, I attempted to develop narratives that played on these facts.”¹⁴³*

Table 7.3.1: Thomas H. Johnson on Resonance of 2001 Leaflet Drops

In Fall 2002, I met with a Special Forces... team sergeant who had been deployed to southern Afghanistan and we talked about my experience working on [Information Operations] products; he presented me with the actual leaflet that I had designed and was dropped into the country. To my amazement, he claimed that he had personally witnessed Taliban members scooping up the leaflet soon after it was dropped from US aircraft and burning it. I viewed this as an indirect metric that the message I was attempting to send via the leaflet and its narrative was a success. If the Taliban were committed to destroying it, I assumed that it was sending a message which they did not want heard in the Pashtun villages.

¹⁴² Johnson 2017: 46-47. Furthered by Johnson (2017: 49): *“Many have questioned the utility of using leaflets at all in Afghanistan, because of the high illiteracy rates. I was well aware that the literacy rates for the rural Pashtun in the areas I expected the leaflet to be dropped—eastern and southern Afghanistan—was low (5 to 10 per cent), but I expected those literate members of a particular Pashtun village to read it to other community members. This is very similar to how shabnamah or ‘night letters’ as well as other types of written information have been delivered to Pashtun communities in these areas for generations. Moreover, I wanted to produce leaflets that could tell a ‘story’ through their visual presentation alone. I believed this leaflet accomplished that goal.”*

¹⁴³ Johnson 2017: 26.

This initial ‘population-centric’ approach, that leveraged pre-existing grievances, appeared to be on the right path by eroding popular support for the Taliban whose own ranks were rapidly depleting as fighters defected to join the winning side or fled across the border to Pakistan (See: Table 7.3.1).¹⁴⁴ However, the US would also miss a vital ‘information opportunity’ to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table as events swayed in US favour.

According to Michael Semple, who, from across the border in Pakistan, had been in the early stages of brokering peace talks with Taliban leadership with intent to prevent a re-surgency by identifying reconciliation opportunities between the Taliban and, what would become, the new Afghan government: *“In the wake of 9/11, the Taliban leadership wanted surrender terms — to live respectably in their homes recognising the authority of the new government which had been imposed by the Americans. Those terms were available; they were torn up. Instead we got, increasingly, stories of Taliban who had tried to go home to their villages in Afghanistan either getting arrested or giving up, crossing the border, going over to Pakistan — ready for the next chapter. The Taliban started to reform the organisation saying that ‘we have been excluded from this new set up, we’re going to have another go’.”*¹⁴⁵

To rebuild a basis of popular support to operate from, the Taliban would require to seek out and identify ‘information opportunities’ of their own. According to US Army Special Forces LTC Scott Mann, this was achieved by ‘going local’: *“Starting late in 2002, Taliban insurgents started coming back into Afghan villages*

¹⁴⁴ Johnson 2017: 50.

¹⁴⁵ Semple 2020: np.

*throughout the rural Pashtun areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan... By operating at the village level, the Taliban... mobilized and co-opted entire villages to support them... [W]orking from the bottom up, within the villages, the Taliban identified and addressed grievances affecting rural Pashtun populations. The most commonly exploited grievance was dispute resolution. Taliban Sharia courts, rather than the government or the village jirga, speedily resolved issues related to conflicts over land rights, water and other disputes."*¹⁴⁶

While the newly established Kabul government ignored the countryside during its formation, the Taliban were able to leverage emerging 'information opportunities' generated by Kabul's ineptitude and negligence to deliver essential services — from security to justice and basic governance — to Afghanistan's rural population. Expanded upon by Thomas H. Johnson: *"the ability of the Taliban to establish shadow governments and a semi-permanent presence in some areas also helps promote their message. The Taliban have been successful at enforcing justice and Shar'iah law, while highlighting the government's inability to impose law and order. The result is that the local populations are increasingly turning to Taliban courts because they are viewed as more effective and fair when compared to the corrupt official system."*¹⁴⁷

From this vantage point, the Taliban launched their own information campaign directed at the population. Further described by Johnson: *"The Taliban quickly learned how to wage a sophisticated and effective information campaign against the 'crusader' invaders and the Afghan 'puppet' regime. This was in stark contrast with the initial view of the Taliban in 2001 as a bumbling, technologically backward enemy with few*

¹⁴⁶ Mann 2017: 39-40.

¹⁴⁷ Johnson 2017: 59.

connections with the Afghan people.”¹⁴⁸ Explaining the utility of this approach, Johnson continues: “Direct engagement with the population is an extremely significant factor which obviously plays upon the strong Afghan tradition of oral history. Additionally, many Taliban fighters [were] locals, which of course makes it easier for them to empathize with people because they know the language and culture, as opposed to the international forces’ distanced approach.”¹⁴⁹

Persuasive approaches that leveraged ‘information opportunities’ were soon displaced as the Taliban regressed to past coercive tactics. Continued by Johnson: *“The Taliban’s messaging campaign and its related stories remain relatively simple in the sense that they reinforce easy-to-understand grievances, promote anti-Western sentiments, delegitimize the Afghan government, and attempt to sow fear among the local neutral/undecided population, as well as government supporters, by threats of violence and intimidation.”¹⁵⁰*

The shift to coercive ‘armed-propaganda’ steadily increased as ISAF troops started moving into the southern rural areas by 2005 and the Taliban began to lose their foothold in rural communities. Initially taking the form of ‘shabnamah’ — ‘night letters’ left at people’s homes overnight that threatened violence if they supported foreign or Afghan government forces — latent threats soon escalated into targeted assassinations and public executions.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Johnson 2017: 61.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson 2017: 58.

¹⁵⁰ Johnson 2017: 100.

¹⁵¹ Kilcullen 2011. Johnson (2017: 97) furthers that: *“shabnamah are a good example of the Taliban’s armed propaganda: they use them to threaten people who do not comply with its rules and it makes examples of people who do not cooperate: dozens of provincial level officials were killed between 2005 and 2006 as an armed propaganda tool after receiving such letters.”*

In the following years, as intense combat battles took place, Johnson explains that: *“Afghan insurgent groups enhanced and modified their propaganda campaign after... by using a variety of delivery mechanisms.”*¹⁵² Beyond *“conventional means such as shabnamah (night letters), graffiti, propaganda videos, using preachers (da’is) to infiltrate areas and call for jihad, khutba (Friday sermons), poetry, taranas (poetic chants), and presence patrols and pattak (ad hoc security checkpoints)”*,¹⁵³ the Taliban began to *“regularly exploit digital technologies such as the internet and telecommunications to convey their messages... [that encompassed] a wide range of message dissemination techniques and platforms, including printed materials, pirate radio broadcasts, official spokesmen, text messaging, their official website... and associated websites in Pashto and Dari languages, [as well as] social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.”*¹⁵⁴

An analysis of the Taliban’s ‘Voice of Jihad’ website and Twitter announcements from Taliban spokesmen identified the following online propaganda themes: the vast majority (86%) of messages bolstered insurgent victories over US/NATO or Afghan security forces — including direct attacks, ambushes, capture of personnel, or destruction of equipment/facilities. Secondary efforts were placed on exploiting: defections of Afghan security forces

¹⁵² Johnson 2017: 98.

¹⁵³ Johnson 2017: 99.

¹⁵⁴ Johnson 2017: 98-99. Furthered by Johnson (2017: 100): *“The Taliban even briefly entertained creating an app in April 2016, ‘Pashto Afghan News—Alemanah AMK’, a portal into the group’s Pashto webpage, but it was removed and banned from the Google Play app store within 48 hours of its appearance.”*

(military and police) who joined insurgent ranks to bolster insurgent legitimacy (5%); insider attacks conducted through infiltration of Afghan security forces to highlight insurgent strength (4%); and, abuses or atrocities committed by US/NATO or Afghan security forces causing civilian casualties or property damage (4%). All falling below one percent were the following themes: statements and responses related to US/NATO announcements or high-profile events; the execution of informants who reported insurgent activity to security forces; civilian protests against the government or uprisings against Afghan security forces; and, last, instances where insurgents provided services to the civil population including security, justice, or development assistance.¹⁵⁵

On the other side of the ‘information war’, US PSYOP efforts sought to achieve four overarching objectives: “[1] to isolate the Taliban and other Afghan insurgents from domestic and international support; [2] to reduce the effectiveness of the Taliban and others’ forces; [3] to deter escalation by Taliban leadership; and [4] to minimize collateral damage and interference with US operations.”¹⁵⁶ However, as assessed by Johnson, “to influence and shape perceptions is very difficult, and for the most part [these efforts have] been only modestly effective for the US.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ These figures were derived from a content analysis of media reports released on the Taliban’s Voice of Jihad website and Twitter announcements from Taliban spokesmen that included: the gathering of 1,900 online reports leading up to the US/NATO withdrawal from September 2013 until January 2014 (as propaganda themes changed in February to focus on the 2014 Presidential Elections); grouping and tagging reports by topic theme; assessing content and messages. Note: As of 2019, the Taliban’s Voice of Jihad website was no longer accessible online.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson 2017: 89.

¹⁵⁷ Johnson 2017: 89.

According to Johnson's study, available in the publication *Taliban Narratives*, US PSYOP messages: *"were generally too broad and not focused on Afghan cultural nuances... [whereas] the Taliban's messages [were] precise, focused and localized, recognizing political and social cleavages in Afghanistan. There is no question that Afghan local politics and the local disposition of the people in the area [were] very important and that the Taliban play[ed] on these dynamics in their messaging."*¹⁵⁸ In a very dire assessment, Johnson concludes: *"that a central assumption and a major finding of the research... is that the Taliban has won the information war against the US Coalition and the Afghan government."*¹⁵⁹ However, it can be understood that, although the Taliban's information campaign may have been superior in content and quality to that mounted by the US, NATO, and their Afghan partners, it does not mean that they succeeded in winning over the Afghan population.

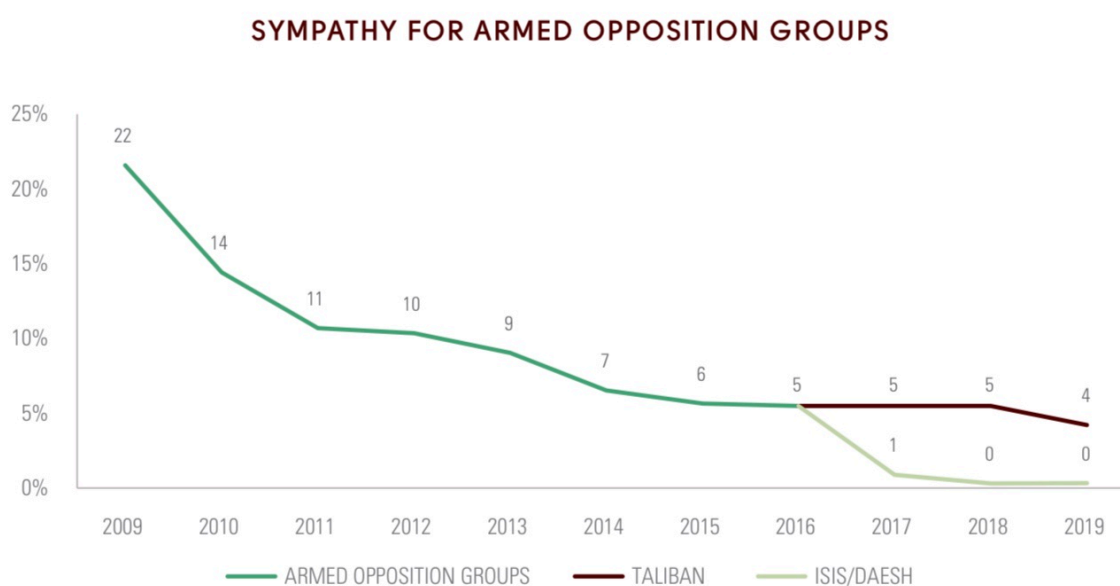
According to the Asia Foundation annual *Survey of the Afghan People*, popular support (measured as 'sympathy') for 'Armed Opposition Groups', such as the Taliban, was not only historically low but continued to significantly decrease throughout the US/NATO mission: measuring 22% during the surge in 2009; dropping to 10% post-surge by 2012; and, falling below 6% after the 2014 US/NATO withdrawal (See: Table 7.3.2).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Johnson 2017: 57. Furthered by Johnson (2017: 95-96): *"This style is virtually impossible for the US and NATO to counter, because of Western sensitivities concerning religious themes that dominate the Taliban narrative space, not to mention the lack of Western linguistic capabilities, including understanding and mastering the poetic nature of local dialects... They understand relevant cultural referents and themes, and of course local traditions. We quite simply do not."*

¹⁵⁹ Johnson 2017: 60.

¹⁶⁰ Asia Foundation 2019: 70.

Table 7.3.2: Asia Foundation Survey on ‘Sympathy for Armed Opposition Groups’



Q-66: “Thinking about the reasons why the Taliban have been fighting during the past year, in general would you say that you have ‘a lot of sympathy’, ‘a little sympathy’, or ‘no sympathy at all’ for the Taliban?” (Chart: Percent who say ‘a lot of sympathy’)

Zeroing-in on the underlying issues affecting strategy, an interviewed PSYOP practitioner described counterinsurgents as being ‘fixated on countering propaganda themes’ — especially those on digital platforms: *“Whatever they (the Taliban) said, we had to craft some sort of rebuttal. It wasn’t very groundbreaking stuff: ‘We strongly condemn the attack against the hospital that killed doctors and children...’ — Really? No sh*t! I’m sure that won every Afghan over who couldn’t possibly been sure if we were siding with the Taliban on this one or not until they seen our tweet from the [ISAF] spokesman.”*¹⁶¹ Johnson relates the crafting of weak PSYOP messages to issues of Western bias: *“American... [PSYOP] messages make perfect sense to Americans because they are framed within an American narrative that reflects American values. In order to message an Afghan audience effectively, however, messages must be crafted in a way that resonates with Afghans’ own narratives and stories. This requires an intimate knowledge of... [their] culture and norms.”*¹⁶² Expanded upon by the interviewed PSYOP practitioner: *“Not only were most counter-messages developed by a bunch of Westerners sat around a table guessing what they thought Afghans wanted to hear — most having never met one who wasn’t on our cleaning staff — we were always visited by the ‘good-idea fairy’” — describing how they would often be visited by higher-levels of command with PSYOP campaign ideas — “They’d walk in, ‘why can’t you just tell them the Taliban are bad?! Show them all the bad stuff they’re doing!’. That’s about as far as their comprehension of the ‘hearts-and-minds’ battle went. You’d be shocked how often that ‘great idea’ resurfaced.”*¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Interview, SQ, Civilian Psychological Operations Planner and Analyst with six-years deployment experience in Afghanistan, 2018.

¹⁶² Johnson 2017: 82-83.

¹⁶³ Interview, SQ, Civilian Psychological Operations Planner and Analyst with six-years deployment experience in Afghanistan, 2018.

Zooming-in to local-actor perspectives, a panel of mostly Pashtun males between the ages of 30-45 was consulted concerning attitudes and perceptions related to US/NATO (or ‘foreign’) forces and the Taliban with regards to their competition of narratives in ‘winning’ popular support.¹⁶⁴

Introduced by a local-Afghan panel-member from a rural community in Eastern Afghanistan, many local residents were not swayed by the narratives of either party: *“They are like two birds with different songs. We are familiar with the song and we are hearing it all the time. Its in our memory very well; we can hum this tune to both the songs! It’s [just] not very interesting for us.”*¹⁶⁵

For both US/NATO forces and the Taliban, the ‘war of words’ was less important than the ‘war of deeds’ playing out in rural localities: *“Foreigners [have shown] some good things; Talibans can’t show this! We get roads; they make bombs and break the roads! We get hospital; they attack and kill doctors! We make a business; they are exploding it! Every success we are having; they are destroying a future! There is no sympathy for these things. Us Afghans, we want a life; there is no life when we make things for our life and they make bombs — they destroy us and because of this, Afghanistan has no future.”*¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Panel-members worked in Kabul but either resided or had family within the provinces of eastern and southern Afghanistan. Most had worked as translators or for various international organisations. Panel-members were selected with ties to these regions as these areas have the highest levels of Taliban activity and score highest opinion-polling surveys regarding ‘sympathy’ for ‘armed opposition groups’.

¹⁶⁵ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

Creating widespread insecurity and uncertainty, another local-Afghan panel-member from Kabul commented how the Taliban's 'war of deeds' discouraged popular support: *"I can tell you this. No one is interested in their words. Only people are wondering: 'what problems can they make for us?' Our big concern now is: What is happening with Americans? Are they leaving? Will our army and police be able to defend us?"*¹⁶⁷

According to panel-members, the Taliban lost support and sympathy steadily as their tactics became more brutal — particularly during the later years of the US/NATO mission. As senior Taliban members were attrited by US/NATO forces earlier in the campaign, these older members, who would attempt to resolve local disputes and perform governance functions, came to be replaced by junior inexperienced fighters filling Taliban ranks and seeking to prove themselves at the expense of local residents.

Such a situation is described by a panel-member who had previously commuted from his translating job in Kabul back home to his residence in a rural Pashtun village in Eastern Afghanistan on the weekends: *"Before, I would enter the check-point — and these, they are old Taliban — maybe they are knowing you work for foreigners (US/NATO counterinsurgents); but, you can explain, 'sometimes you must work with the enemy' — this, they understand. Maybe you must pay them some monies but they let you drive (and pass through the checkpoint). These young ones, you can't reason [with]! They don't care for monies; they don't care for how Afghanistan is in past (referring to a tradition of working with 'outside' parties and 'bet-hedging' outcomes). They make a stack of heads by the roadside (referring to travellers through the checkpoint they had decapitated), and they want to impress their commanders 'see what a good job I did'."*¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁶⁸ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

Alongside such atrocities, witnessed regularly by local-Afghans going about their daily lives, Taliban *jihadi* narratives were not resonating amongst an increasingly war-weary population, as described: *“We know what dangers Taliban brings. When Taliban stopped fighting Americans (because they left post-2014), why did they not stop fighting our ANA [Afghan National Army]? They say its because its infidel army and government because it was created by the infidels — maybe three or ten percent of people you will find are believing this; but, regular Afghans, we know this is not true: our government, our army, these are Afghans, these are Muslims — there is no excuse for killing them; this is how we are knowing that these are Taliban lies. They want power in the government... other motivations, to destroy Afghanistan... [and] make us weak.”*¹⁶⁹

Noting that the Taliban have experienced difficulty recruiting local Afghans into their ranks, relying primarily on recruits residing on the Pakistan side of the border, panel-members discussed what segments of the Afghan population were likely to join or be recruited into the Taliban, as explained: *“Maybe, before, some normal Afghans are joining who are angry from some destruction (caused by US/NATO) that happened to them (personally) and they are taking revenge. This can be normal. But not now. Now, its jobless people. They need money... [and sometimes] only the Taliban are the ones who have job for them. When they close[d] American bases (referring to the ISAF retrograde where counterinsurgent bases that employed many locals were closed throughout the country), you see many people who worked with Americans after are working for Taliban. Its not option for them — they don’t chose this side or that side — they choose one option: to have job.”*¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018. The percentages mentioned are not related to a statistical study but rather a common form of descriptive parlance.

¹⁷⁰ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

As a second category, panel-members identified ‘disillusioned’ youth ‘without futures’ who are ‘easily-mislead’ — a category many panel-members expressed the greatest fear for a resurgence of popular support for the Taliban. As described by a panel-member whose family moved to Kabul from Helmand: *“This young generation, they don’t remember Talibans. They can’t believe the bad things of this time (Taliban reign) because they don’t remember. They see all these things — brothels, gays, drugs — they think foreigners caused all this bad and brought it to Afghanistan. But they don’t know the real bad caused by the Talibans—in before times—because they did not see it; and, it’s easy to convince for them—for someone to say—that all Afghanistan’s problems are from foreigners. They believe it.”*¹⁷¹

Shifting the discussion to ‘anti-American sentiment’ (to include the entirety of foreign interveners of the ‘counterinsurgency apparatus’), panel-members distinguished between: (1) general ‘defiance’ and ‘suspicion’ regarding foreign intervention; and, (2) those ‘self-imposed’ through ‘their own mis-deeds’.

Regarding general ‘defiance’, panel-members discussed how attitudes shifted: from the initial ‘light-footprint’ invasion of 2001 — where their presence was ‘tolerated’; to the height of the 2009 ‘surge’ — where foreign forces ‘overstayed their welcome’ and fomented fear that they would remain as an ‘occupier’; to the post-2012 ‘retrograde’ — that alleviated this concern while invoking another that the country would be abandoned before establishing a lasting peace.

¹⁷¹ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

As explained by a panel-member: *"They should not take it personally! If you know our history you know we are not liking anyone coming to Afghanistan for too long. We don't accept to be ruled even by our own governments! Yes, if foreigners want to make help for us, if they want [an] ally in this this region, there is no better ally than Afghans! But we don't like anyone to stay! Not for too long! We don't like even our own government to stay!"*¹⁷²

Regarding aid and developmental assistance, panel-members described how ideals inherent in the way 'counterinsurgency apparatus' viewed its own intervention — what could be described as 'altruistic humanitarian assistance' — clashed against local suspicion of more sinister 'ulterior motives', as described: *"We are thinking 'what will we owe' if they bring us these things? A hand is not given without wanting for return. This is how we are thinking in Afghanistan: favours are for favours. It's impossible to not think this way for us. Always people are wondering this."*¹⁷³

Although these initial suspicions fomented 'anti-American' sentiment, the bulk were drawn from US/NATO forces own 'mis-deeds' — especially highlighted, during the 2009-2011 surge where troop numbers were at their highest and there was an increase in civilian casualties, night-raids and house searches, traffic accidents, and their presence began to be an imposition to residents' daily lives. As explained: *"People are only praising Talibans sometimes for pay-back — when [foreigners] drop bombs, kill children — and people are thinking 'good, they are deserving this' when Talibans are attacking them."*¹⁷⁴ However, these sentiments were not seen as driven by Taliban propaganda but rather by US/NATO forces own 'actions' and 'presence'.

¹⁷² Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁷³ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁷⁴ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

According to panel-members, while this increased sympathy towards frustration expressed through insurgent narratives, it did not legitimise them, as described: *“Yes, we are knowing this and this is what Taliban are saying: ‘foreigners make many problems that are bad for Afghanistan; they throw bombs that kill our Afghan people; they steal our mountains to making profit from us; they make our women prostitutes and tell them to take off their head coverings’. They think this is excuse for them and the things they destroy. They say [to] us: ‘the infidels built it, so it must be destroyed’. So they are destroying bridges and roads built by the foreigners... but these things are good for us! They are bridges and roads that let us drive to purchase and sell from the market, that we can travel to see our families, that we are driving to bring our sick to the hospital! Yes, you can say foreigners are bad and pointing your fingers at many many mistakes — but Taliban is never bringing [something like] hospital to us. Only they will let our people die... and offer to us nothing but more killings. I do not know how people, especially foreign people, can be thinking this is good for us!”¹⁷⁵*

Another local-Afghan panel-member furthered how ‘anti-foreigner’ propaganda did not bolster the Taliban’s own image, as described: *“I am telling you this, this we know: maybe, probably, both are bad for us (foreigners and Taliban)! [But] we are knowing a big difference. Foreigners build many things for Afghanistan; [but] Taliban can never build anything — only they destroy! Yes, foreigners make bad mistakes: they are dropping bombs that kill our Afghan people; and so are Taliban! And we know the big difference: the foreigners are not trying to kill our people; it is not their intention, it is mistake. But when Taliban are doing this, this is their intention: they are doing this on purpose and cruelly — right to our face, they will say and tell us. It is no mistake! Who can say that this is good for us?”¹⁷⁶*

¹⁷⁵ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

Panel-members shifted discussion to how ‘anti-American’ sentiment may have changed post-2014 in the face of failing to deliver ‘peace’ before the withdrawal and concerns over abandonment. As described: *“I can tell you, people were asking ‘are they really leaving?’ It’s bringing some joy but mostly, and right now, it’s bringing fear. People are not knowing what to think for their future.”*¹⁷⁷ Discussions of abandonment and growing resentment were mixed with objections and agreement, with one panel-member emerging with the comment: *“Afghanistan is America’s best ally. And best ally in this region. When you make a friend in Afghanistan, you are a friend forever. Even when bad things are happening to us, we are not forgetting what good things they have done for us.”*¹⁷⁸ Continued by another: *“It’s not something we like to think about. If you make a friend in Afghanistan, you make it for life! We are hoping America will do the right thing.”*¹⁷⁹ A third panel-member raised suspicion over US interest in peace-talks with the Taliban as a form of retribution: *“We are thinking, maybe now they want to make something bad for us... punishment for not cooperating when they are here. [But] I hope this is not true.”*¹⁸⁰

Moving beyond suspicion, panel-members expressed scepticism over the viability of Taliban peace-talks — especially where Taliban legitimacy and sympathy has vastly eroded amongst the majority of the population. As explained: *“It’s hard to think... to go back to these bad times of Taliban; with so much change for Afghanistan; so many change in issues and life, like for women — what will happen to them? Now they are making education, going to universities in Kabul, finding job for more family [income]. It’s*

¹⁷⁷ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁷⁸ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁸⁰ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

*hard to think what will happen to all this — what they will bring to government if they are joining? I don't know how Afghan people will accept them. I don't know how they will accept our new Afghanistan. [But] we are hopeful for anything that can stop all the violence."*¹⁸¹

However, as expressed by another panel-member, many Afghans are willing to entertain and accept any possibility that offers a brighter future: *"We all dream! [We]...can be very optimistic. This is normal for people who have nothing to be optimistic [about]... we are happy for anything that will maybe bring peace to Afghanistan. Anything! People are optimistic, but no one is honest (to themselves), there are a lot of views... I have to think: yes, I will accept Talibans as my neighbour if he agrees — accept law, not to harm me, and stops what is harming Afghanistan. [But], that is [the] problem — you can never know if he is accepting this or if he is waiting for when government is weak... How can anyone be honest to this question if we don't know honestly what are the possibilities. We are hopeful! And, we are cautious!"*¹⁸²

In closing, panel-members discussed how US/NATO counter-propaganda messages 'missed the mark' by focusing on the negative actions of the Taliban: *"They say to us, why are you supporting Talibans? You know they are very bad! Yes, I am knowing this! Everyone is bad! And so are my options... I can't choose who I am liking more. I have to [deal] with who I am facing. This is survival for me and my family."*¹⁸³ Furthered by another panel-member: *"Everyone is knowing Taliban is bad for Afghanistan; that with them, we have no future. [But] we do not know what is our future. And [because of this], we are needing to take Taliban threats very seriously!"*¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁸² Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁸³ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

In doing so, counterinsurgents failed to understand local realities and the pragmatic sense many Afghans, especially in rural areas, approached them with: *“Many people in Afghanistan, they will tell you, [that] it is us (Pashtuns) who are all of Afghanistan’s problems; that we are supporting Taliban. This is not true. We live in such bad areas — they can say this in their safe areas (referring to other ethnic groups)— [but] it’s us who live with Taliban in our areas and get their attacks all this time; it’s our people who are [their] victims everyday. We have to live with them; it’s not choice for us, it’s only reality.”*¹⁸⁵

Reflecting back on strategy, the interviewed PSYOP practitioner commented how counter-propaganda efforts that amplified insurgent narratives in attempt to delegitimise them often back-fired: *“Telling them the Taliban were bad actually increased fear; it pushed [the Taliban’s] message for them [because] that’s what they were trying to achieve! This is the difference between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ support... Near the end [of the mission], the Taliban weren’t even trying to sell anyone on their ‘legitimacy’... they were just trying to scare and intimidate the hell out of them (the population) — brutalise them into submission.”*¹⁸⁶ Furthered by Thomas H. Johnson: *“any message purveyor... needs to reinforce a people’s already existing attitudes rather than producing new ones.”*¹⁸⁷ To this extent, both counterinsurgents and the Taliban failed to produce messages that addressed actual concerns of the population.

Nearing the end of the ISAF mission towards the US/NATO withdrawal — as Taliban recruitment became restricted to foreign fighters, youth, and the jobless — the Taliban failed to garner even marginal support from local Afghans as ‘sympathy’

¹⁸⁵ Interview, Afghan Subject Matter Expert Panel on Counter-Propaganda, 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Interview, SQ, Civilian Psychological Operations Planner and Analyst with six-years deployment experience in Afghanistan, 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Johnson 2017: 93.

spiralled to all-time lows. Leading up to the withdrawal, the Taliban intimidation and coercion campaign, meant to dissuade Afghans from participating in the 2014 Afghanistan Presidential elections, backfired — especially as local populations took notice that the insurgent group was unable to follow through with pre-Election Day threats and the retrograde of US/NATO forces de-legitimised *jihadist* narratives that ‘occupying forces’ were ‘here to stay’ to rule Afghanistan.¹⁸⁸ Taking notice and struggling to redefine a relevance narrative, Taliban propaganda messaging went dark for several months before re-emerging with a new ‘friendlier’ narrative combined with direction to fighters to both ease-off locals but ‘kill moderate mullahs’ in an effort to regain lost sympathy and legitimacy (See: Table 7.3.3).¹⁸⁹

Regarding the ineffectual efforts to counter Taliban online and media campaigns, Michael Semple notes how counterinsurgents failed to recognise that Taliban propaganda was primarily produced for their own consumption as an effort to bolster morale amongst their rank-and-file: *“A propaganda machine runs around the clock to spread word of [their] achievements, primarily among the group’s own activists and supporters. Taliban commanders have fallen in love with messenger apps, which provide a daily stream of multimedia content boasting of victory after victory. Using these apps comes at a considerable risk, because smartphones can alert US drones to their targets’ location. Still, it seems as if every captured or killed enemy soldier must be filmed and the video disseminated to boost morale through the Taliban ranks.”*¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ According to Tomsen (2017: 36), the withdrawal bolstered US/NATO legitimacy with regards to the information war: *“On the positive side of the ledger, American and Coalition combat forces have been withdrawn. The Taliban message to end the American occupation is less credible. The conflict is now primarily an Afghan war: Afghan extremists based in Pakistan versus the anti-extremist government in Kabul. The Taliban are divided vertically and horizontally, tarnished with being the Pakistani proxy that they are.”*

¹⁸⁹ Omar 2014: np.

¹⁹⁰ Semple 2018: np.

Table 7.3.3: Mullah Omar's Message Calling on Fighters to Reduce Cruelty

Brave Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate:

It is your religious and national duty to try for the prosperity of the people and win their hearts and minds. Shun arrogance, vanity. To use weapon and force without justification allowed by Sharia rules; to threaten, harass and oppress people or harm their life, property and honor is a great crime. You will not be able to escape accountability in this world and the world to come for committing that. Your conduct with people should be nothing but tolerance, humility, forbearance, selflessness and mutual respect. Remember, God does not look at (judge) our outward image but look at our hearts and deeds that how we behave with people.

Mujahideen should make honest efforts to maintain justice and security in areas under the rule of the Islamic Emirate. They should clear (the areas from) thieves, highway robbers and saboteur elements and procure a conducive atmosphere of security and well-being for people.

Every caution should be taken to protect life and property of the public during Jihadic operations, so that, God forbid, someone is harmed. The Department of Prevention of Civilian Casualties should seriously pay attention to its task to prevent civilian casualties. Mujahideen should always remember that our steadfastness and success against the global invaders is the result of our holding the rope (religion) of Allah. So Mujahideen should, within the framework of obedience, follow the injunctions of Allah (SwT); the (traditions) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and obey their superiors. Avoid hypocrisy, disagreements and discrimination. Strengthen the thread of unity, brotherhood and internal trust. Keep the rank of Jihad against the enemy as unbreakable as a cemented wall.

As per the policy of the Islamic Emirate, Mujahideen should have a conduct of sympathy with those who leave ranks of the enemy. Give them (a warm) welcome. Appreciate and reward heroism of the committed Afghans who launch attacks on the enemy and then join the ranks of Jihad.

Excerpt from: Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (may Allah protect him) on the Auspicious Eve of Eid-ul-fitr (2014), Mullah Mohammad Omar Mujahid.

In reflection of ‘understanding’, the ‘knowledge-producer’ panel provided discussion on which sources of ‘population-centric’ understanding were more effective at unravelling complexity to inform decision-makers in a manner that aligned with the insights provided by the local-actor participants interviewed in this case-example.

The panel began by discussing how quantitative ‘Public-Opinion Surveys’, such as the example presented earlier regarding ‘sympathy for Armed Opposition Groups’ (See: Table 7.3.2), can be misleading where they impose ‘binary-response’ options to ‘elicited’ questions.

Reacting to the Asia Foundation survey question (seen previously in Table 7.3.2), a panel-member commented: *“Measuring ‘sympathy’ does not measure ‘tacit support’. [Taliban] intimidation can lower ‘sympathy’ for their cause, but that doesn’t measure if their intimidation or coercion is working... Local residents might not like them but that doesn’t mean they’re not going to have to work with them as a persistent presence, however maybe ‘unwelcomed’, in their community. It’s not grounded in how things actually play out.”*¹⁹¹

Furthered by a Local-Afghan Cultural Advisor regarding polling data that showed high support for the Peace and Reconciliation Programme aimed at re-integrating Taliban fighters: *“These responses are optimistic. People are answering this way: ‘Sure, I want if it brings peace’; but, what if they (Taliban) don’t [abide]? Do I want him for my neighbour close to my family? This is not telling you all the other many concerns people are having with this — even if they are hopeful.”*¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹⁹² Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

An example was provided where polling data led to counterintuitive explanations. In this case, a ‘Public-Opinion Survey’ nearing the 2014 withdrawal showed the following trends in Kandahar Province: support for the presence of ‘International Forces’ was low; belief that the Taliban would take over if ‘International Forces’ withdrew were high; support for the Taliban was low. Interpreted by a panel-member: *“Kandahar is the Taliban heartland... [so] it was easy to assume that they wanted us out and for the Taliban to take over. But that didn’t explain why support for the Taliban was also low... We had to do some digging.”*¹⁹³ Here, contextualised explanations emerged in ‘atmospherics’ data: *“The real story turned out to be, there was a local uprising in Kandahar where some locals stood up to try and kick the Taliban out. ISAF and Afghan forces shut it down, told them to stop, not wanting the public to take matters into their own hands. Basically, the locals wanted us out so they could stand up their own militias and take on the Taliban in their own way. Without that insight, we would’ve just presumed we lost Kandahar and the population was sitting around happily waiting for the Taliban to take over. Turns out it was the opposite.”*¹⁹⁴

According to those familiar with the ‘atmospherics’ programme, the non-elicited discourse captured in the context which the conversations occurred regularly provided a *“grounded reality of how things will really play out”* and offered *“insight into the complexities of counterintuitive pragmatic realism that local Afghans regularly approach complicated issues with”*.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹⁹⁴ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

Such insights were particularly relevant to understanding the resonance of both US/NATO and Taliban information campaigns, as described by an Atmospherics Analyst: *"If the Taliban were saying something that resonated, we'd hear it. If they said something and no one was repeating it, it's safe to assume that it's not resonating by that same virtue."*¹⁹⁶ More important was the discovery of 'unknown-unknowns', as continued: *"These are conversations. You don't just hear what is resonating, but can also see why something is believable or not, how people react to it, through their own analysis on what they think it means. Most often, what is resonating has little to nothing to do with Taliban narratives — beyond direct threats of violence, of course — but 'unknown' narratives. Discussants are more concerned with issues affecting their future — yes, security is a big one — [but] mostly they focused less on what the Taliban were saying and more so about what we were saying — or 'not' saying: how long are we going to stay? What is our plan for when we leave (referring back to the 2014 withdrawal)? They're trying to prepare for their future. They're 'bet-hedging' and 'war-gaming': 'what will I do if this happens? Or that happens?' This is the most important content for analysis... [and] what we should be prioritising to focus on."*¹⁹⁷

In response to the Atmospherics Analyst's comment, an Afghan panel-member who had fielded focus-group interviews for the 'Social Science Research Analysis' programme outlined the weaknesses of structured elicited interviewing: *"This is very true! We can do focus-groups on insurgent narratives — it will make lots of discussion and you will find many reasons why people are maybe agreeing or not agreeing to this. [But] I can tell you from, working and living in these places, it's not [insurgent narratives] what people are talking about. They are talking about these things (referring to previous comment).*

¹⁹⁶ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

¹⁹⁷ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

*These things are the big things affecting their lives. They are afraid for what security problems Taliban are making for them, [but] this isn't biggest fear for their future. They know what Taliban are saying; they've heard [for] many many years. They don't hear what Americans are saying; [and] this is biggest for future: how long will [they] stay? Will they [continue] to pay our army? Will they keep to make projects? What will they do about Pakistan?"*¹⁹⁸ Returning to the discussion of the short-falls of elicited research platforms: *"If this is [the] question [that is] asked (about insurgent narratives), [respondents] will give you lots of conversation. Maybe you will find good reasons why they don't believe their [narratives]. [But] when you are asking for this thing, its not something they are normally talking about — only after you asked for it. [And] you are missing all the big things they are talking about — that bring real fear to their lives."*¹⁹⁹

The 'knowledge-producer' panel zeroed-in on a practical example where counterinsurgents developed PSYOP campaigns to encourage voter participation and attempted to counter Taliban propaganda attacking the legitimacy of the elections.

Introduced by a local-Afghan Researcher who had conducted focus-groups on election participation for the Social Science Research Analysis programme: *"Mostly, the Taliban were saying about the elections [that they] were 'un-Islamic', [that] the candidates were traders and not real Muslims, [the elections] were controlled by the 'infidels', [and] talking a lot about Afghan government corruption. These are normal [narratives] for them to say. Biggest fear from them that [made] people think 'I don't want to participate' is*

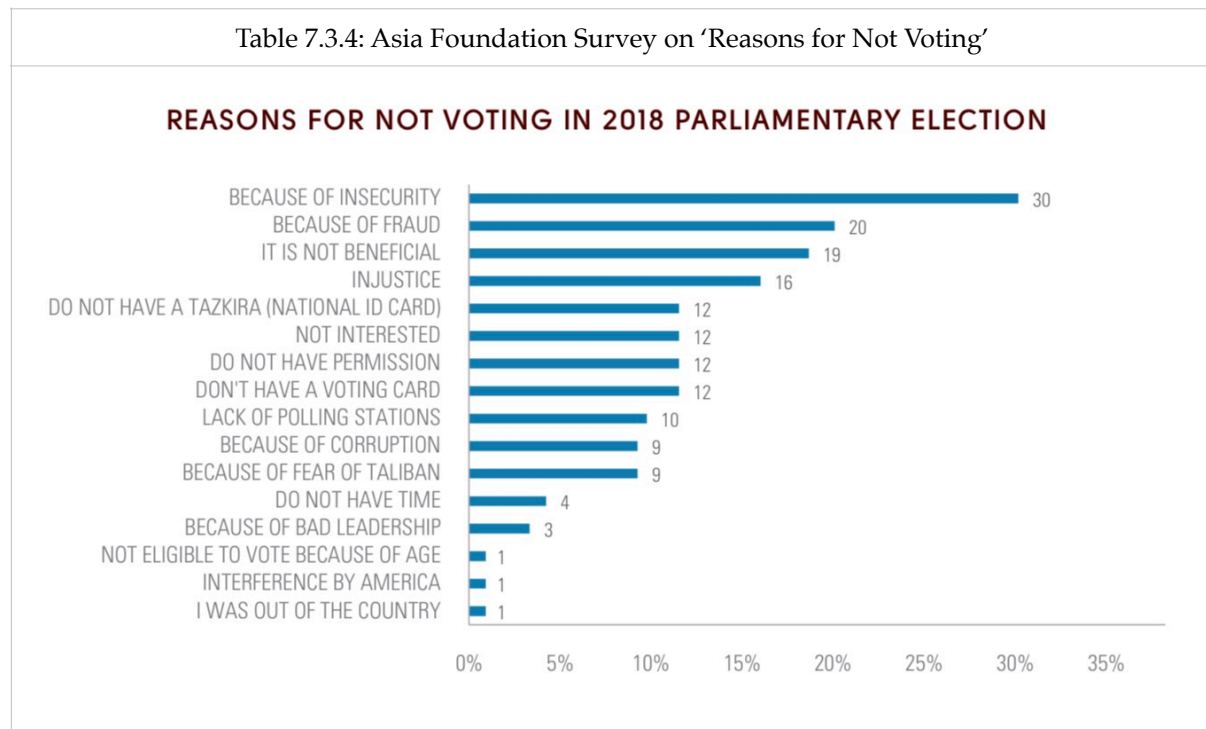
¹⁹⁸ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018.

¹⁹⁹ Interview, 'Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding' Interview Panel, 2018. The Afghan panel-member also discussed how elicited binary-response questions did not suit patterns of local response options: *"Here is standard: okay, you ask 'Do you like Taliban?' — 'No'. 'Do you like International Forces?' — 'No'. Then keep asking: 'Do you like your neighbour? Do you like your mother-in-law? Do you like anybody?' — 'No. No. No.' This is how people are answering. You can only get proper answer from putting the question in a situation (referring to contextualising the question)... like 'Are International Forces' good for local security?' — 'Yes'. Most people here don't like to choose options. They like to talk good points, bad points, and not to choose."*

the threatening. They were talking how they would over-run voting stations on Election Day, set up check-points looking for [people with] voter ID cards, [and] cut off fingers... This is very scary for people!”²⁰⁰

However, as demonstrated in public-opinion polling, most of these narratives did not resonate with exception of threats of violence and insecurity (Table 7.3.4).²⁰¹ Explained by a counterinsurgent: *“When we focus on counter-messaging all the propaganda narratives, we don’t address any of the concerns that were actually stopping people from voting — and all that effort is wasted. All these things can be addressed if we know what they are. Some things, like ‘insecurity’, require an action, not a message, to address. When the [Afghan security forces] did a good job showing presence, making people feel safe to vote, that’s why — when the elections were successful — you seen so many media images of Afghans holding up an ink-stained finger (from voting) as a big ‘F-you’ to the Taliban.”²⁰²*

Table 7.3.4: Asia Foundation Survey on ‘Reasons for Not Voting’



²⁰⁰ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

²⁰¹ Asia Foundation 2019: 163. Q-50b. (If Q-50a answer is ‘no’) Why didn’t you vote?

²⁰² Interview, GC, Retired US Army Psychological Operations Officer, 2018.

In summary discussion, panel-members highlighted the importance of sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ that indicated how competing narratives were resonating (or not), identified ‘unknown-unknowns’ to be brought to the attention of decision-makers, and offered contextualised insight into how local-actors perceived situations should be addressed.

Returning to ‘strategy’, this case-example on ‘countering-propaganda’ evidences the following ‘lesson encountered’ as a pathway enabled through effective sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ to inform counterinsurgent decision-makers: *relinquishment of ‘enemy-centric’ orientations shifts strategy from a reactive to a proactive posture by identifying engagement opportunities and addressing issues that affect and resonate with the population.*

Furthermore, issues identified through ‘population-centric understanding’ were often beyond the scope of simple ‘counter-messaging’ to resolve, as described by a member of the ‘knowledge-producer’ panel: *“the data voiced issues that needed action and the attention of decision-makers above our [military] chain-of-command. Some were security, but most were developmental, policy or governance, and economic — all of which provided opportunities across the spectrum of government departments from the embassy to USAID to jump in and focus their efforts where it mattered [and] have the greatest impact.”*²⁰³

²⁰³ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

The importance of this lesson, and what opportunities it creates for the institution, is reflected upon by a counterinsurgent: *“By shifting focus to what matters and resonates with the population... you’re cutting out the middleman and getting right to the heart of the issue. If the insurgents have an issue that resonates with the population; when you focus on the population, it will come up — these are basic principles of warfare, ‘economy of effort’ and ‘centres of gravity’ — if the insurgents have a grievance that’s relevant, its going to affect the population and you’ll hear about it; but if its not, you’re wasting valuable resources on things that don’t matter. You don’t end up chasing your own tail, you’re chasing the insurgents’ tail — another principle of warfare, ‘seize the initiative’ — and you’re letting them ‘seize the initiative’ by playing into their actions... while ignoring the opportunities for initiative you could be taking if you were focused on the population. There’s no easier way to put this: insurgents only exist because segments of the population hold grievances that support their cause — drain the swamp, [to] kill the mosquito! If you address the cause, you’re left with a bunch of fighters who start to question ‘what am I doing this for?’... Once the swamp dries up, it’s harder and harder for them (the mosquito) to lay down roots. Eventually they’ll need to find a new purpose in life. Maybe they’ll want a part of that new Afghanistan you just built, and make their own way in it.”*²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Interview, GC, Retired US Army Psychological Operations Officer, 2018.

The interviewed counterinsurgent additionally cautioned against completely dismissing what may be legitimate insurgent grievances and the importance of monitoring propaganda for issues that decision-makers may be able to address: *“If the insurgent narrative resonates, fix that issue! Address it! It’s a valid concern! If it’s not [resonating], then maybe it’s worthwhile to track — see if it grows legs — but, you need to cut through the noise, somehow, [and] focus your resources on what will have the greatest impact... That’s the population! Addressing legitimate grievances is probably the best way — and given the [withdrawal], [also] our last opportunity — to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table... hoping they’ll want to align themselves with the rest of the population; or, at least, to erode their recruit base”*.²⁰⁵

Such opportunities were further identified by Michael Semple, who reinforced that post-withdrawal in 2016: *“Already, some Taliban are showing signs of war fatigue. During a cease-fire in June, fighters poured into Afghan towns and spoke openly of their wish for peace. Local peace deals and de-escalation could take advantage of these sentiments.”*²⁰⁶ Carrying this sentiment through to 2020, Michael Semple continued: *“I take some hope from the fact that now Afghans, on both sides of the conflict, are incredibly tired of this war — they are not baying for blood — they want to see an end to it.”*²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ Interview, GC, Retired US Army Psychological Operations Officer, 2018.

²⁰⁶ Semple 2018: np.

²⁰⁷ Semple 2020: np: Continued by Semple (2020: np) on opportunities for peace: *“With people I trust amongst the Taliban, we’re involved in a collective effort to make sense about what’s going on inside their own movement, about what’s going on inside Kabul, and amongst the non-Taliban Afghans, and making sense of what the United States is doing.”*

CONCLUSION(S) ON ‘APPLICATION’

“As we head for the exits in Afghanistan, reflecting on our performance there yields value if it institutionalizes practice and experience in doctrine so that it is not lost as operations end and people move on. In particular, we can benefit by studying the role of intelligence in conducting population-centric counterinsurgency.” As an initial ‘lesson encountered’: “The types of information needed by the military to conduct population-centric counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan shares little in common with intelligence used for lethal targeting. Years into the Afghanistan campaign, recognition that success required effective population-centric interventions prompted a redirection of intelligence assets to focus more on acquiring detailed sociocultural information about... [local] populations. Other reforms have sought to remedy information deficiencies by revamping the assumptions and concepts that frame the analysis of populations, their identities and attitudes and the so-called ‘hearts and minds’ efforts seeking to change them. These adjustments during a campaign are welcome but still fall short of supplying information that can confer a strong confidence in the success of these non-kinetic activities. Appreciation of the inherent limits to the information and the level of confidence that it confers for such activities needs to be brought into the planning and execution of population-centric interventions of any ilk, whether stability operations, counter-insurgency or humanitarian assistance, regardless of their size and political significance.” — David Katz, Anthropologist and US State Department Foreign Service Officer, on Fitting Intelligence to the Fight, 2013.²⁰⁸

The limited selection of case-examples examined in this chapter begin to demonstrate how effective forms of ‘population-centric understanding’ that accurately reflect localised situations can both empower under-utilised ‘human focused’ roles of the ‘counterinsurgency apparatus’ — whether Civil Affairs (e.g. development), Foreign Internal Defence (e.g. stability), or Psychological Operations (e.g. influence) — as well as widen the array of strategy options when ‘humans’ are ‘placed-in-order’ for decision-makers.

²⁰⁸ Katz 2013: np.

In doing so, the case-examples evidence situations where ‘population-centric understanding’ can provide opportunities to circumvent forms of institutional dysfunction where practices adhere to institutional familiarities or fail to adopt strategies that suit the problem rather than institutional proclivities, whether by: (1) unravelling complexity in a manner that allows the problem to define strategy options through identification of underlying ‘root-causes’ over apparent ‘symptoms’ — as in the case of ‘countering-narcotics’ where ‘alternative livelihood’ development programmes sought simple agricultural ‘crop replacement’ strategies to a problem that was inherently an economic ‘market issue’; (2) enabling ‘bottom-up’ strategies tailored to localised situations that avoided weak national-level ‘top-down’ blanket strategies — as in the case of ‘Village Stability and Afghan Local Police’ where localised solutions acted as a ‘connecting node’ bridging the gap between ‘top’ and ‘bottom’; and, (3) relinquishing reactionary postures through proactive identification of participant-generated solutions and conflict ‘centres-of-gravity’ — as in the case of ‘countering-propaganda’ where shifting from an ‘enemy-centric’ to a ‘population-centric’ orientation provided opportunities to address issues as they emerged and allocate resources to those that mattered most and would have the greatest impact.

Amongst the sources of ‘population-centric understanding’ utilised to inform strategy, those more adherent to ethnographic methodologies more effectively unravelled complexity in a manner that could be actioned by decision-makers. These included: (1) the long-term strategic patterns captured in the ethnographic works of ‘academic anthropologists’; (2) the baseline ‘area studies’ conducted by ‘Afghan

Research Institutes' that placed complex issues within their appropriate historical, situational, and socio-political-economic contexts; (3) 'atmospherics' that identified 'unknown-unknowns' and emerging issues through the gathering of non-elicited spontaneously occurring discourse; (4) local-Afghan researchers familiar with local contexts who could field additional qualitative research to answer questions arising from changing trends in non-contextualised 'public-opinion polling' data; and, (5) the embedded Special Forces teams who lived immersively in local Afghan settings, took interest and became familiar with the day-to-day lives of their hosts, and were assisted by Human Terrain Teams to interpret their situated observations through an anthropological lens.²⁰⁹

This conclusion provides encouragement that, when unfamiliar 'human' aspects of conflict are 'placed-in-order' in a manner where ambiguity is reduced and complexity unravelled, actionable strategies with clearly defined and obtainable goals become apparent. However, for adoption into institutional practice as a 'lesson learned', this must be placed within a system that exists within its own institutional culture — not just for the future of Afghanistan but also the multitude of population-centric conflicts the institution is likely to encounter.

Afghan participants equally reflected on the importance of applying adequate forms of 'understanding' to 'strategy' as well as the adverse effects of its absence in 'making matters worse'. An Afghan participant, who had served as a 'Local-

²⁰⁹ These findings coincide with Hulsman's (2005: 67) study *Lawrence of Arabia and the Perils of State Building* where he asserts: "Policy initiatives tend to work best when they are implemented in an organic, bottom-up manner, when they take account of indigenous realities, and when they work with the currents of history."

Cultural-Adviser’ to US/NATO counterinsurgency forces prior to the 2014 withdrawal, described the lack of applying ‘understanding’ to ‘strategy’ through a metaphor of ‘fixing a leaky-bucket’: *“They don’t try to find holes (in the bucket). Americans, they throw money into the bucket and hope more money will [cover] the holes. Never are they stopping, look at from where are these leaks, and find the better way to block holes in the bucket. They think if they throw more money, then there will be too much for it to leak. They have lots of money; it’s fine for them to do this. [But] we see, as [foreigners] go away and take their money, we are left with just holes!”*²¹⁰ This sentiment was furthered by a local-Afghan Researcher on how poorly informed strategy exacerbated rampant corruption, diverting limited resources away from issues needed for longterm stability, and perhaps lost a fleeting opportunity to move the country past conflict: *“With the monies wasted in Afghanistan, our roads could be paved in gold — but they are not even paved in stone (concrete)! We are left in this garbage! Our leaders, they keep all theses monies and take it Dubai. They do not care for Afghanistan: they have many opportunities to leave and make a nice life; but, we do not, we are stuck here!”*²¹¹

Such concerns were shared by counterinsurgents who, beyond being uncertain of Afghanistan’s future, anticipated the institution will not learn from its unaddressed mistakes: *“There’s no shortage of lessons we should be learning from Afghanistan. For the most part, the population worked with us—or at least not against us—and we can’t expect that factor to exist everywhere: its a critical factor because it points at us, our operations, the ways we do things — and that’s probably why we’re walking away and*

²¹⁰ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

²¹¹ Interview, ‘Sources of Effective Population-Centric Understanding’ Interview Panel, 2018.

shutting the door: 'It's an Afghan problem now, Right?!' My fear is this: like Vietnam, we will move on before taking notice... It's an open wound, painful to look at, and we'll probably push it aside, pretend its 'old-news' acting like we moved on to something more important, or just write it off with some 'we should've never bothered in the first place'... My fear is we are just going to face these things at the next turn, not far down the road, but far enough down the road [where] it will be too late to reflect... There's something to be said: 'those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it' — we will just run into this again! There must be an Afghan saying that's similar? Is there? I don't even know — I guess I still don't understand Afghanistan!"²¹²

Cautioned by LTC Mann, the institution is on the path to repeating its mistakes: *"Instead of learning these lessons, we are actually boxing them up with all of the other counterinsurgency actions and putting them in the attic of US foreign policy misadventures. If we can't open our eyes to the mistakes of our policy — of how we analyze and address foreign crises — we are doomed to repeat them. Being drawn in deeper, and on enemy terms, is not a mistake we can afford to repeat."*²¹³ Furthering that: *"To do this, we must set aside...the desire to forget Afghanistan. By failing to learn the lessons of Afghanistan, we leave the door wide open for the violent extremists to follow us home."*²¹⁴ In closing, LTC Mann warns *"[t]he US is losing this game... Our fight with these violent extremists is becoming circular"* — offering a glimpse into how this circular pattern of institutional dysfunction will unfold (See: Table 7.1).²¹⁵

²¹² Interview, WM, Retired Department of Defense Civilian Employee with multiple deployments to Afghanistan, 2018.

²¹³ Mann 2017: 12.

²¹⁴ Mann 2017: 20-21.

²¹⁵ Mann 2017: 3.

Table 7.1: LTC Mann Reflection on Consequences of Failing to Learn
“The US is losing this game... Our fight with these violent extremists is becoming circular”

Our response to these imminent attacks will be predictable... First, there will be collective shock and disbelief across the US. We will shake our heads and ask, “How could this happen?” Others will scream amidst the chaos, “We must do something!”

As a way of “doing something,” hundreds of thousands of American flags will go out on balconies, porches, and stoops. We’ll come together, briefly. We will see these patriotic images contrasted with the utter destruction of the attack site plastered across our television screens as we are glued to the 24-hour news station. Dismay will give way to ANGER... Nashville will produce stirring country music songs about the need to go kill the bastards who did this to us. Nationalism will swell... as yellow ribbons decorate every oak tree on Main Street, America. And then, almost on cue, the long formations of young military heroes will reappear. Tens of thousands of warriors with short-cropped hair and determined faces will board aircraft to make the long flight across the ocean. The news outlets will capture every heartfelt moment of this road to war... These warriors and families will say painful and tearful farewells. There will be quiet reassurances of coming home soon, reluctant head nods by those who must linger, and then the dreaded long embrace that will have to last across many miles and frequent heartaches...

These images will stir our national soul and our lust for vengeance to its core. Then, as our high-tech aircraft with their heavy bomb payloads approach their targets, as our... soldiers close in on the enemy... PAYBACK! Our enemies will feel the military might the US can bring to bear. Some will never know we are coming. Most will cower in fear. But a few will smile... they are the ones who wanted us there in the first place... For with our arrival will come our lust for vengeance, which ensures we forget everything we learned from the first decade of war... After all, revenge really is best served cold. The fight will be epic. We’ll lose hundreds. We’ll kill tens of thousands. By all accounts, it will be a clear victory for the far superior American military...

Time will march on, slowly, as we wonder why the foreign central government we’re throwing billions of dollars at can’t extend influence or power beyond the capitol. The war will drag like a slow funeral march. One by one, the American flags will come off the porches as flag-draped caskets come home. The country songs will fade and our own collective lust for vengeance will lose its zeal... After the initial salvo ends and the smoke clears, the once clear US combat mission, built around retribution, will start to blur... Security forces will shift to high-dollar humanitarian and nation-building efforts while fanning out with vast troop formations to search and destroy a shadow enemy... To soften the blow of combat operations we’ll promote the legitimacy of the local government and dole out development charity by constructing roads, wells, and schools.

Before we realize what has happened, our celebrated liberation will become an unwelcome occupation... And with multitrillion-dollar price tags on these counterterrorism campaigns, the US will be one step closer to fiscal insolvency and much weaker on the world stage.



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